



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

### Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

### About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

3 3433 07602714 7

# THIS WAY OUT

ANNA MCCLURE SHOLL



2

NBS  
Shoh



**THIS WAY OUT**

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

# THIS WAY OUT

BY

ANNA McCLURE SHOLL

Author of "The Law of Life," etc.



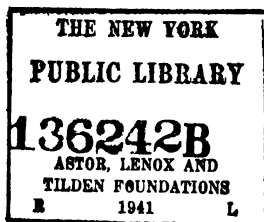
NEW YORK

HEARST'S INTERNATIONAL LIBRARY CO.

1915

60





COPYRIGHT, 1915, BY  
HEARST'S INTERNATIONAL LIBRARY Co., INC.

*All rights reserved, including that of translation into  
foreign languages, including the Scandinavian.*

PROPERTY  
OF THE  
NEW YORK  
SOCIETY LIBRARY

F

To  
MR. AND MRS. D. LEET WILSON

436-4



## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER . . .	1
II PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN . . .	27
III "DIAMOND, DEAMOND, WHO HAS THE DIA- MOND?" . . . . .	55
IV NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG . . . .	87
V THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL . . . .	113
VI THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA . . . . .	145
VII THE LOST WATTEAU . . . . .	193
VIII THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR . . . . .	221
IX THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT . . . . .	243
X WITHOUT SCREENS . . . . .	277



---

**CHAPTER I**  
**THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER**



# THIS WAY OUT

## CHAPTER I

### THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

**T**HERE are persons even to hear of whom quickens the pulses and invests life with charm. I am always inclined, myself, toward those individuals whose contribution to society cannot be expressed in material terms; who cannot be described as owning this and doing that, yet who exercise a deep influence over others.

In this age of achievement — a dial recording only deeds — it was a pleasure and a refreshment to me that the tradition of Mrs. Carpenter included no propaganda, no command of several arts and sciences, any one of which would tax a Michel Angelo, no feverish absorption in “movements,” no probing into problems, no play-



## THIS WAY OUT

ing with the Poor as with the latest toy. Mrs. Carpenter, it seemed, was simply herself. Her husband adored her, her friends loved her, but the source of her influence was apparently in nothing objective.

I had just missed meeting her on several occasions, baffled by such petty tricks of fate as a delay in a cloak-room, or a blocking of carriages, or a tedious visitor. I arrived to find her gone, or I was obliged to leave before she appeared, so that I had only the faint comfort of her tradition like the lingering odor of mignonette, a flower I associate with her for no reason whatever. Hostesses said, "What a pity that you have just missed Mrs. Carpenter," or, "You must stay until Margaret Carpenter comes," but, anxious though I was to see her, destiny intervened.

Then her husband died and for nearly four years she was indistinguishable in the twilight of the mourning world. But her tradition, contrary to all precedent, seemed to grow more lively through her absence. Mrs. Carpenter was remembered, waited for, spoken of, was more in evidence at dinner parties than the guests there

## THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

in the flesh. My curiosity concerning her was whetted by her spiritual presence.

To a hostess speaking wistfully of her one day, I said:

"Do you think I shall be disappointed when I meet her? You know how fatal it is, this heralding."

"What have we heralded?" she asked.

I was answered. No mask of beauty had been held before me; no shimmer of intellectual vanities had beacons; no array of deeds had laid their numbing touch on my imagination. I was spared all the usual prefacing platitudes. My fancy, untrammelled, could portray what it wished. Expressing this thought to my hostess, she replied:

"That's the beauty of Mrs. Carpenter. She leaves us free."

A negative but glorious description! Of how many of our friends, I reflected, could we say it, laying as they did upon us the chains of their ambitions, their follies, their sorrows, their conception of themselves to which ours must tally at risk of a break.

As it fell out, I was not to meet Mrs. Carpen-

## THIS WAY OUT

ter for the first time in what is vaguely known as "society," but in strange scenes and under strange circumstances, and I'm happy it was so. This is the story:

On a blank day in February, when the Avenue promenaders wore bunches of violets and one felt Lent in the air, I sallied forth with no more thought of adventures than one has when one goes to church. I had left my office at noon after a fortnight of terrific work, knowing that I must pause and get my bearings or I should have no head left even for a survey.

My aimless wanderings took me first to the park, but it was damp and inhospitable; then to Riverside Drive, but the banality of that neighborhood had its usual effect of throwing me into great depression of spirits. So I faced around and after a moment's hesitation decided upon old New York — real New York.

When the 'bus had put me down in Washington Square, I turned westward toward the little lost city of Greenwich, intricately asleep between the Square and the Hudson. I peeped into alleys inhabited by artists; made bias cuts between forgotten ovals and triangles enclosing a morsel of

## THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

green; read old American names on shining silver doorplates; looked into tenement courts, where the very children seemed subdued and old-fashioned; and, wending my way ever southward, came at last to an ancient church.

Some tall quaint houses flanked it. On the doorstep of one of them which seemed quite deserted stood, looking puzzled and uncertain, a lady in black. Several circumstances drew my closer attention to her; her appearance belonging to quite another world than this shabby neighbourhood; her evident intention of being admitted to this shut-up house; her surprise that only echoes responded to the sounds drawn from the discoloured knocker, which was shaped, appropriate to the dead look of the dwelling like an ancient urn.

As I was on the other side of the street I could watch her without seeming to do so. After more knocking — couldn't she understand there was no one in the dreary place! — she drew a card from her purse and consulted it, was reassured and knocked again.

There was no answer of course. I was vexed by her denseness. Couldn't she see the boarded-

## THIS WAY OUT

up door at the basement, the windows blind with the dirt of years, the "queer" look that houses, like people, acquire when left too much alone.

I resented her in conjunction with such a house, for even my distant view of her showed her a vital person, at once sensitive and possessed of strength, the kind of power that emanates from the soul.

Suppose, I thought, this lady, evidently wealthy, has received some appealing letter which is a ruse to bring her to this shabby neighbourhood and rob her! The theory, however, did not fit the circumstances, or the thieves were in no hurry to begin their work.

Fantastic as my idea was, it sent me across the street to the foot of the steps leading to the door before which the lady in black stood. She turned and I saw her face, which was in itself a warrant for chivalry. I know no better how to describe it than to say that it was the most warmly human countenance I have ever beheld. The eyes were penetrating, yet most gentle, the mouth firm and sweet. Seeing that I had come to offer my assistance, she said without trace of self-consciousness:

## THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

"I am worried. I am afraid something's wrong in the house."

"But no one lives here."

"Oh, yes; a caretaker. I must get in to him, for I had a letter from him this morning telling me of his illness."

"The house looks uninhabited," I remarked.

"It certainly does," she admitted. "But this is the address Barnes gave. He was a butler years ago in my father's family. I had lost sight of him."

She drew out the card again. I ran up the steps and glanced at it over her shoulder. The address was correct.

Instinctively I reached out my hand and turned the knob. The door opened. We looked at each other in amazement; then we stepped across the threshold into one of those halls, found in old New York houses, which are divided by a series of arches and have their staircases at the extreme rear end.

In the dim February light this relic of a past grandeur was inexpressibly forlorn, the effect of barrenness being heightened rather than decreased by a few decaying remnants of furni-

## THIS WAY OUT

ture. The atmosphere was cold, sour, and stagnant.

"Barnes wrote he was ill and very poor," she remarked, looking about her. "The house is in litigation and for the past year, he said, no one had paid him for his services. Really, one might think there was no one left to pay him."

In the silence that followed her speech we distinctly heard footsteps on an upper floor, but stealthy and faint, as if some one moved about with extreme caution.

I turned to her. "If you will permit me, I will remain with you until you have found the caretaker."

"He must be too ill to get up."

We began our search, first closing the front door. My companion had accepted me with confidence, with a naturalness that seemed to express her knowledge of life's being in itself a great adventure, so that a happening such as this only fitted into the story.

The basement revealed nothing but the dank and grim disorder of an abandoned kitchen and its offices. Evidently it had been left for years to the rats. I was glad to lead the way out of it.

## THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

We went next through the double drawing-rooms separated by graceful Corinthian pillars — nothing left here but the mirrors over the carved marble fireplaces.

We ascended to the second story. In the front room we found the object of our quest. The old man was lying in bed, his eyes closed. By the bedside was a table bearing medicine bottles and some utensils for cooking. An oil-stove burned in a corner.

She hurried to the bed, bent over it, laid her ungloved hand on his forehead, then touched his wrist.

“ You poor old Barnes ! ” she exclaimed.

Her voice, sweet and vibrant with compassion, thrilled me. It reached the apparently senseless figure on the bed, for he stirred and, coming out of his sleep or stupor, opened his eyes. They gazed at her a moment dully, then his recognition of her brought life to them.

“ Miss Margaret,” he whispered.

He tried to rise, but she checked him.

“ I came as soon as I received your letter. You dated it four days ago, but it only reached me this morning.”



## THIS WAY OUT

"I knew — you'd come," he said, an expression of contentment in his face. His gaze wandered past her to me. She answered his unspoken question.

"This gentleman kindly assisted me. I had knocked a long time. He found that the door was unlocked."

"It oughtn't to be unlocked," the old man quavered. "I've been so sick that I couldn't —"

"Yes, I know — poor Barnes! What have you done all alone here?"

He looked puzzled. "Mebbe I had the fever," he said; "but I've had the feelin' I wasn't alone. Some one's kep' the fire; some one took that letter; some one brought me water and milk. I ain't seen him — but I heard things."

She turned startled eyes upon me. There was enough suggestion of the supernatural in the old man's words to set her imagination working.

"I heard footsteps when I came in," I said; "the house may have another lodger."

"We must look for him. Perhaps I can send him for a doctor. You shall have a doctor and a nurse to-night, Barnes, and to-morrow you shall

## THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

go to a hospital where I have a friend at court. You'll have everything done for you."

"I know that, Miss Margaret," he whispered.

"He has evidently had a friend at court here," I said. "Shall I go through the house and investigate?"

"I wish you would — if I am not giving you too much trouble with all this."

I didn't particularly fancy the task, but I was keen to render her even the slightest service.

The house became drearier and dingier as I ascended. I looked into long-deserted bedrooms, peered into deep store-closets, into bathrooms with the huge tubs and clumsy faucets of an ancient day, but I found no one. Suddenly a cry came from the second floor, where she was, a woman's cry of fright. I swung myself down four steps at a time. She was standing in the hall, face to face with a man who had evidently just emerged from some lurking place. My second glance at him told me that I need not fear for her. He was ethereally gaunt and haggard. His boyish features had a dazed expression, while in his sunken eyes was a furtive look that I at once connected with the footsteps we had heard.

## THIS WAY OUT

She had recovered herself. She was gazing at him inquiringly, but with no alarm.

"He was in this store-closet," she explained.

"I went there to look for more covering."

"Who are you?" I demanded.

He seemed terrified, but remained silent.

"Who are you?" I repeated harshly.

He made no answer. His eyes appealed to her. Then she spoke gently.

"Are you the kind person who has attended to the poor old man who is so sick in there?"

There was a sound like a sob in his throat. He trembled, gazed at her a moment, then bowed his head.

"I am sure you are," she said.

"Why are you hiding?" I asked.

He did not reply. His face became ashy. Again his eyes asked something of her.

"You're hungry and cold, aren't you?" she said.

He nodded.

She turned impulsively to me.

"We must send him out for food."

"Oh, no! I can't go out," he cried.

"Why not?" I questioned sharply.

## THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

His pallor increased. He looked ready to die of some secret terror, some blasting memory. She extended her hand and touched his gently, her eyes full of pity.

"Tell us. Please tell us. We are your friends."

He broke down then. "I've killed a man," he moaned and, covering his face with his hands, he began to sob terribly. The choking, rasping sounds awakened strange echoes in the empty house.

She turned to me, her face almost as white as the wretched creature's before her. She, too, was trembling, but I saw her make a brave effort at self-control.

"His mind may be wandering," she said. "He needs food at once. Would you? — oh, you've been so kind!"

I would have gone to the world's end for mystic manna had she asked me. She quickly enumerated some things to buy, and would I telephone a certain Doctor Weston? She gave me the number.

All the while the shaking creature before her was watching her as a forlorn child might watch

## THIS WAY OUT

its mother. His record of himself was in utter discord with his appearance. He didn't look as if he could hurt a fly, but I was leaving her with a self-confessed murderer and an old man who might die on her hands. I whispered:

"You shouldn't be alone. Shall I call a policeman to take charge?"

"No," she answered. "We couldn't hand him over in the condition he's in. The police are sometimes rough with them, you know. I'm not afraid. You'll take care of me while this gentleman goes out for food, won't you?" she addressed him.

He straightened himself. His trembling ceased for a moment.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll take care of you," he answered, a thrill of something like pride in his voice.

I was by no means reassured. The February afternoon was closing in. The grim house was already full of night. She saw me hesitate. By way of answer she took the man's hand and led him into the sick-room. I followed her and lit the solitary burner by the head of the bed.

My errands took a longer time than I had

## THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

anticipated. When I had bought the things she had asked for, I telephoned Doctor Weston. He was not in, and I left the message with the office-girl. I found myself glad the doctor could not come at once. I wanted further opportunity to assist the lady in black before her friends rallied about her and her strange charges.

As I drew near the old house my imagination conjured up horrors. I thought of all the dreadful things that might have happened in my absence. My heart thumping hard with excitement and apprehension, I hurried up-stairs. The door of the front room was ajar, the scene within peaceful. By some heavenly alchemy of her spirit she had infused into that wretched room a sense of comfort. The bed was straightened. The old man lay easily on his pillow. The kettle was boiling on the oil-stove and the saucepans were arranged in neat order. She sat by the bed. Near to her in a rocking chair she had placed the Unknown. The calm of confession seemed upon him. His eyes regarding me had lost their fear.

He made a motion to help her with the preparations she at once began, but she told him to sit

## THIS WAY OUT

still. He would need his strength later. When the food was heated and served and the two men were eating it, she drew me into the hall.

"He has told me his story. I must have missed it in the papers. I don't often read such things. Did you read of the death of a cooper named Hansen on South Street, last Monday?"

"I did, indeed!"

"This man — no — tell me first what the papers said," she demanded eagerly.

I thought a moment, then the details came to me.

"He was found lying among his barrels, a heavy bruise on his forehead. There was evidence that he had died while intoxicated. A knife lay near him, but he was not cut. Murder was suspected, for his assistant has been missing since Monday, but no adequate motive could be found. The assistant had a good reputation, the money-till was untouched, the cooper's gold watch was still on his person."

"Hansen's reputation — did they speak of that?" she questioned breathlessly.

"Quarrelsome and cruel."

She clasped her hands as if in thankfulness.

## THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

"It tallies. He has told me how it happened. I drew it from him little by little. He went to work Monday morning, found his employer, this cooper, intoxicated and torturing his cat,"—she shuddered. "He had kicked the animal, and when it tried to escape over some barrels through a high window he threw an open knife at it, cutting it on the head. Warwick, his name's Warwick, tried to stop him. Hansen turned on him with the knife and in defence he struck out his arm. The cooper lurched and received the blow on his head. It killed him. Warwick thought only of flight. He was afraid to go home, afraid to let his wife know. In his wanderings he found the door of this house open, and he slipped in."

"Then he has been here ever since Monday."

"Yes. He went out once at midnight with the letter, but he didn't dare to buy food. The milkman left milk for Barnes, and he took a little of that."

"A strange story," I commented.

"But I believe him," she said earnestly. "I am trying to persuade him to go home and see his wife, then to go with us to the police station and



## THIS WAY OUT

give himself up. If he tells the story as he told it to me don't you think they'd let him off with very light punishment? Do you know anything about the law?"

I smiled. "I am a lawyer — but how much I know is another matter."

"Then you'll help him," she said with sweet eagerness.

"I'll do everything in my power," I replied, adding mentally, "If I help him I can see you perhaps, for you'll be interested in his case."

"Don't you think his story plausible?"

"Judging from his appearance — yes. I'll question him further."

"Don't frighten him," she warned me.

We found him busying himself with the dishes when we re-entered the room. His pallor and his trembling had left him. He looked another man.

"I've told your story to this gentleman," she addressed him. "He is a lawyer. He will do all he can for you. But you'll go with us, won't you? No brave man hides. You must clear your name for your wife's sake. You cannot go on like this."

Tears filled his eyes.

## THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

"I'll go anywhere with you, ma'am," he answered humbly.

"Then after Doctor Weston comes, we'll start."

Half an hour later the three of us were in a cab on our way to the address Warwick had given. We entered the tenement district and stopped before a tall building, the tenants of which, as it was the supper hour, were in their rooms. Instructing the cabman to wait, we ascended slowly to the top floor. A door on the landing was open and Warwick went in. We heard him say "Mary," then a woman's cry rang out. It told us what the wife had gone through these four days.

After a few moments Warwick asked us in. He named me, but his eyes were fixed on my companion.

"Mary, this is the lady who's helping me," he said, and it was as if he added, "she's the most wonderful human being I ever knew."

The two women clasped hands, understanding each other at once as good women are likely to do across all intervening barriers of social differences. Mrs. Warwick brought forward her chil-

## THIS WAY OUT

dren and my lady in black bent over them tenderly. The parents clung together, but I could see that the wife was of true metal. She seemed anxious to have her husband's story told to the authorities without further delay.

So we were soon on our way to the police station of the precinct in which the cooper met his death. Our anxious silence was broken at last by my lady in black — I call her mine by the right of subsequent events — who, turning to me, proclaimed with a touch of triumph:

"The cat's the best witness. It's lucky it was a cat. They always stay in their old haunts."

"What do you mean?"

"That poor wounded animal is probably still in the cooperage, hiding among the barrels. We'll have an officer sent there to get him. Oh, you may smile," she added, observing the amusement in my face, "but trifles tell in law."

"They do, indeed!" I thought, "and in love, too."

I wondered what she would say to the police sergeant and his underlings, but I ceased to be anxious. She would undoubtedly exercise the

## THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

gift she had of speaking straight to the heart of the person she addressed.

We all filed into the station. She turned appealingly to me, but I said:

“ You tell the story.”

She told it, ending with the earnest request that in corroboration of it a search might be made for the cat at the cooperage. I watched the officers during her narrative to gauge what effect it had upon them. Her own conviction of the man's innocence was fervent enough to create conviction in others, but evidently the soil was already prepared. I gathered from stray remarks, from nods and looks, that the case had somehow explained itself through these four days. What evidence of neighbours, of circumstances, of the dead cooper himself, had created the impression of accident, not murder, I don't know, but it was there. She only waved the wand and the plant sprang from the hidden seed. Of course Warwick must be locked up, but we all felt that the matter would soon be cleared.

The sergeant didn't seem to take the cat seriously as a witness, but he was no more able to refuse the lady in black anything than I had been.

## THIS WAY OUT

One of the officers was despatched with orders to get into the shut-up cooerage somehow, and fetch the animal if he were there.

We waited for another half hour. Then the policeman returned, very red in the face and bearing a bag of something squirming. Cutting the cord, he dumped the contents on the desk, a forlorn, starved brindle cat, with a deep wound over one eye.

"That's him! that's Tommy!" Warwick exclaimed. "You've got the knife. You see what Hansen did to the poor beast when I stopped him."

His wife began to cry softly. My lady in black stroked the wild-eyed creature and took out her purse.

"He must have milk or meat. Somebody here will take care of him?"

A chorus of assent arose around her.

I asked if I might have the honour of conducting her to her home. As the cab rolled up the Avenue she said:

"And all this time I haven't asked your name."

"Charles Rittenhouse."

## THE TRADITION OF MRS. CARPENTER

Her face lighted with a charming smile. "I think we have mutual friends."

"And your name?" I questioned eagerly.

"I am Mrs. Renwick Carpenter."

I felt that glow in my heart which follows the sight of a wonder long anticipated and found to be all that one hoped — as at the first visit to Westminster Abbey or to the incomparable Madonna of the Dresden Gallery.

"You have justified the tradition!" I exclaimed.

"What tradition?" she asked wonderingly.

"I can't tell you in so short a time," I said, "because it covers many years. I had always heard of you and what I heard was a prophecy of this afternoon. Generally one is disappointed in a person who has been so heralded, but —"

"You are not disappointed?" she interrupted with a little smile.

"I hope not to be." I hesitated, then bridged months by a moment's daring: "You see, a man might want you instead of the tradition."



## **CHAPTER II**

### **PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN**





## CHAPTER II

### PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

**C**ALLING upon Margaret one evening, she told me that the managers of the Eagle Theatre had sent her two seats for the opening night of a much heralded play, "Count Your Change," in which Peter Fremwell was to appear, supported by Alice Bennett, a youthful actress in whose career Margaret said she had taken much interest ever since meeting Miss Bennett at a reception and talking with her on the subject of the drama.

"She seemed to regard her work with such faith and seriousness that I have, as the saying is, kept my eye on her ever since. This play is, I believe, her first big opportunity, and I am eager to see her prove herself. Of course Fremwell must have divined her quality or he never would have taken her on. They call him Attila the

## THIS WAY OUT

Hun, I believe, on Broadway, because of the scourge he is at rehearsals."

"Did you ever meet him?" I asked with a passing twinge of jealousy.

"Often! he is delightful to meet casually. I should say his fierceness was only in the cause of art. Will you go with me to this opening night?"

Seated in our chairs before that veil of Isis, a theatre curtain, Margaret and I confessed to each other on the opening evening of "Count Your Change" that we were still unjaded enough to be thrilled by a first night. A play was such a human thing. To see it fail was to be embarrassed as by the maladroit gesture of a friend. To behold its success was to rejoice as in a friend's triumph over difficulties, each dramatic victory being an affidavit that man was greater than fate.

"I am afraid Alice Bennett is very nervous to-night," Margaret commented. "She is a high-strung little woman, and so much is at stake!"

"I should think Fremwell himself would be a bit uneasy — since she has to justify his discrimination as well as her own talent."

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

As eight o'clock, the hour for the curtain, drew near, we saw that there would soon be standing room only. By and by a hush settled upon the audience preliminary to the restlessness which marks its consciousness of delay. Of course, first nights do not always go smoothly, so we settled ourselves for a wait.

Suddenly the orchestra stopped in its hectic rendering of a popular melody to permit some one to be heard who had stepped before the curtain. This individual, who seemed an understudy or other supernumerary, inquired if there were a physician in the audience. A middle-aged man sitting next to Margaret rose at once in response to the summons.

My companion turned an anxious face to me.

"Stage fright makes them ill sometimes," she said. "I hope it isn't Alice Bennett."

"Whoever it is — he or she is probably holding the curtain, and that is a pretty important thing."

At the expiration of about ten minutes the physician came back to his place with a slightly puzzled air, and perceiving that Margaret and I had observed his return with interest he said to Mrs. Carpenter:

## THIS WAY OUT

"Nerves are mighty queer things, aren't they?"

This statement being too general for other than a mild assent, he began to relate the particulars of the case upon which this remark bore.

"I've just seen an example of what can be effected through an association of ideas. There can be no harm in telling you — since the congregation behind the curtain, at least, is in possession of the facts — that Miss Bennett is in a state of extreme agitation because her sister, of whom she is very fond, has left the theatre without explanation. It seems that Miss Bennett sent a note to this girl, whose chair was C-112, asking her to come to the dressing-room a moment, and the girl, who is only eighteen, was neither in her chair where Miss Bennett had herself seen her safely seated nor could she be found in any part of the theatre."

"This has just happened?" Margaret asked.

"Ten minutes ago. Now it seems that this sister has been in a state of great anxiety over the play, and her leaving her seat just before the curtain is in itself strange — but what put Miss Bennett into a nervous collapse is not just the disappearance but the association of ideas of

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

which I spoke. Five years ago another member of her family dropped suddenly out of sight. Do I make it clear that what is passing in her mind now is almost a photographic repetition of the emotions evoked five years ago by the other event. But those feelings of gradual anxiety, then alarm, then suspense and despair must have extended over a period of months, while now they are, as if by a focusing glass, concentrated in a few moments — unlucky moments for Fremwell and the success of the play," he added.

"She's no better, then?" Margaret asked anxiously.

"I administered a simple restorative, but her agitation will probably continue until her sister is in her place again, since there was no reason on earth for her leaving it."

"Perhaps," Margaret said, "the sister went to the dressing-room to adjust a stray lock of hair."

The physician shook his head. "They've searched the theatre."

Margaret pondered a moment, then asked me for a pencil and a slip of paper. Obtaining these she scribbled a note and passed it to one of the

## THIS WAY OUT

ushers, who disappeared behind the boxes, returning a moment later and making a signal to Margaret, who turned to me, saying:

"I think you can come too."

Wondering what her intention was I followed her and soon found myself behind the scenes, where the electric atmosphere which always prevails on a first night seemed heightened to a forked lightning blend of nerves and tempers. We passed through an avenue of the sullen and the agitated, finding refuge in a quiet alley where the light streaming from a dressing-room displayed the actors in this unexpected crisis. I don't know how the impression came to me, but seeing the still group about Alice Bennett, who sat like one devoid of life before her mirror, her face chalk-white beneath its make-up, I knew that the invisible lash was being used to galvanize her into motion. The manager, his face cruel with apprehension, was using it; Peter Fremwell, who seemed suffering with Miss Bennett as well as inflicting pain upon her, was using it; her understudy was wielding it, but with a wrist robbed of strength by a vision of opportunity.

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

Margaret went forward. "Alice," she said softly.

This voice from the laity seemed to penetrate to that desert of anxiety in which the leading woman was stranded, forgetting even the great responsibility of her evening. But Margaret received no answer.

"Alice," she repeated, "it's I, Margaret Carpenter. There's some very simple explanation of your sister's absence — and I shall find her for you while you are playing."

She took Miss Bennett's hand as she spoke, looking down at her with a warm, deep gaze, as if she were drawing to the surface a soul near to its drowning.

"I understand," she said; "you're overstrung and suddenly half frightened to death by a simple incident just because you are overwrought. But I tell you it's all right! Come! They're waiting."

Alice Bennett began to tremble, but this visible agitation was the sign of her return to life. She spoke with a quivering lip.

"You see I never got over that first trouble,



## THIS WAY OUT

which was so mysterious — and Jean is all I have.”

“I know,” Margaret said soothingly. “And you are just in a state to fancy the worst. But the worst never happens when we fancy it. This is to be a great evening — and — you must think of others besides yourself. Make the effort, dear — at once!”

Her calm, authoritative voice seemed to restore Alice Bennett’s balance. She rose shamefacedly and, still holding Margaret’s hand, turned to the manager.

“I’m better now. I can go on.”

Fremwell addressed Margaret, his voice brusque with his gratitude.

“What good angel sent you here, Mrs. Carpenter?”

“I had the impulse to come, for I had been through a somewhat similar experience myself once. The chair of the physician you had a few moments ago is next to ours, and he told us what was holding the curtain.”

“You don’t think anything has happened to Jean?” Alice said pleadingly.

“No, I don’t!” Margaret replied with em-

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

phasis. "Give me your house number and telephone number."

"They've telephoned already to the apartment."

"Give me the numbers anyway, and a description of your sister. I'll find her for you!"

Whatever the grounds of her confidence, it was strong enough to restore strength and courage to the trembling young woman who, after she had complied with Margaret's request, faced Fremwell as a soldier might his general.

"You'll play up," he said kindly. "But for heaven's sake, don't let your mind wander once."

"I daren't," she whispered, for she had only just recovered from a vertigo over the black gulf of malign possibilities.

She vanished from our sight, a creature suddenly divested of her attributes and adjuncts as Alice Bennett in panic over a missing sister to be that person in the play whose problems she must at any cost make real to the audience. With her were swept away the whip-wielding manager, Fremwell the caustic, and the little understudy. We were left in the glare of the incandescent lights in an atmosphere smelling faintly of calci-

## THIS WAY OUT

mine and cold cream. The play was not for us, though a distant thunder of applause told us that the curtain had at last risen.

"Well," I said, facing Margaret, "what shall we do first?"

"I'm thinking," she replied.

After a moment or two of silence she began to think aloud. "I can only conjure up one good reason for her leaving the theatre."

"What?"

"Flowers."

"Flowers!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. In the excitement all day she probably forgot about them until she was actually in her chair. Then, having time to consider, she remembered that Alice ought to have flowers after that great climax in the third act."

"How do you know there's a great climax in the third act?"

Margaret smiled. "There always is — or ought to be."

"Ah, that explains her going out, perhaps," I said dubiously. "But," I challenged, "why hasn't she come back?"

"That is precisely what we have to discover.

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

It may be an accident, but we won't telephone the hospitals just yet. Do you mind very much losing the play?"

"We'll come to-morrow night again," I said, delighted that destiny was favouring me. "Now, where are you going first?"

"To the nearest florist's on Broadway," she replied. "Naturally, having very little time and being in evening dress, she would go to the nearest flower shop."

My smile was incredulous but Margaret seemed unconscious of it. Ascertaining first that seat C-112 was still unoccupied, we proceeded on our errand, emerging from the stage entrance as two people upon a vague quest — and certainly an ambitious one — to find a missing girl in all New York before the last curtain fell at eleven.

"I hope poor Alice can keep her nerve through the evening," Margaret said. "If we can only clear this up before the third act!"

We turned into Broadway. Across the street, within a few doors of each other, were two florists for our choice.

"We'll go to both," Margaret remarked.

I was curious to know what would be her pro-

## THIS WAY OUT

cedure after entering. She herself was wearing violets that I had sent her, and my masculine mind was slow to picture any flower that she could appropriately ask for, but while considering this problem I heard her inquire if they had gardenias. She wanted a gardenia to put with her violets.

Gardenias! Of course! How stupid of me!

"I suppose you have a good deal of trade for the Eagle Theatre's opening nights," she was saying to the clerk. "I mean complimentary bouquets for the star tied up with yards and yards of ribbon."

"Yes'm — sometimes," he replied. "Not tonight, though. I guess they was afraid of a frost," he added with a laugh.

On the sidewalk she turned to me with a smile. "She wasn't in there, you see. Now for our next one."

"Another gardenia?" I laughed.

"No! I am going directly to the point this time."

The second shop was larger, with a greater variety of flowers visible in the cases and on the counters. Margaret was looking about her as

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

if searching for some particular flower when a clerk approached us.

"Have you no American Beauties?" she inquired anxiously.

"I'm sorry, but we sold the last two dozen about half an hour ago."

"To a young lady?" Margaret said quickly. "A young lady in an evening cloak — bare-headed?"

The clerk looked surprised, then considering a moment he replied, omitting to subscribe to the description:

"Yes — a young lady. We could send out — if you care to wait."

Margaret thanked him, but said we hadn't the time. As we reached the street I began to have a masculine impatience of following clues so delicate.

"Have you really proved anything?" I inquired. "Think of the thousands of young ladies in New York, the thousands right here on Broadway."

She laughed. "Now, if you had said 'young men' I should feel the force of your argument, for after seven P. M. young men all over New

## THIS WAY OUT

York are buying four, perhaps six, American Beauty roses — or if they are extravagant, a dozen, for some girl they want to please; but don't tell me that hundreds of young ladies are buying two dozen American Beauties at eight p. m. unless it is some great occasion like this."

"Then," I said, "she ought to be at the theatre with her roses."

"We'll send an usher to know if seat C-112 is still unoccupied."

"If it is empty?"

A shadow passed over Margaret's face. "Then it is an accident — or she's gone home!"

"Why should she go home?"

Margaret pondered a moment. "Of course, I can only give you feminine reasons. She might go home to make what's known in bridge as a re-entry — a return to the theatre in some sort of triumph. Maybe she remembered that she had a scarlet ribbon enough at home to tie up those flowers without adding two dollars to the cost of the two dozen roses."

"But would she miss the play for that?"

"Of course she has seen it dozens of times at

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

rehearsals — but I'm inclined to think she didn't go home."

When we found that Miss Bennett's sister had not returned to the theatre I was for calling up the hospitals at once but Margaret seemed unwilling. An entr'acte was on, the first act being just over, and we lingered a moment to hear the comments of those who came out into the lobby. From them we gathered that Alice Bennett was proving a disappointment.

"You see she has a divided mind, poor dear," Margaret murmured. "We must find that missing sister during the next act."

Telephoning the apartment we learned that Miss Jean had not gone there.

"Where, then, did she take her roses?" I demanded of Margaret.

She stood for a moment lost in thought.

"She meant them for Alice. If she did not return to the theatre it was because she encountered some one of even more interest to her than her sister."

"Could it have been a sweetheart?" I ventured.



## THIS WAY OUT

"A sweetheart need not keep her from the theatre."

"Who then?"

"I find it difficult to conjecture."

We went out again on Broadway, looked up and down, turned south aimlessly. Alice Bennett had described her sister, but a verbal description is like a signpost. It may point the way to a destination, but it does not overcome the difficulties of the road. I saw that Margaret, looking anxiously into the faces of the young women who passed her, was bewildered and at a loss what to do next.

Suddenly I saw her dart from my side toward a diminutive messenger boy who was sauntering along with the inimitable leisureliness of his kind, a large American Beauty rose firmly held in his teeth, his freckled nose buried in its petals. As I caught up to Margaret I heard her say:

"Please tell me where you found your rose."

He regarded us doubtfully. I obtained his confidence by slipping a quarter into his palm.

"On Twenty-sixth Street. A young lady, she dropped it. She was walkin' and talkin' very fast, so she didn't notice."

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

"Was she with a man or woman?" Margaret questioned.

"With a man. She seemed tryin' to take him somewhere — and he wasn't payin' no attention. He acted like he didn't hear her."

"Did she have many roses — like this?" Margaret questioned, her voice not quite steady.

"An armful of 'em. That's why I didn't think it no harm to take this one."

"Which direction were they going — the man and the woman?"

"Towards the East River."

"Call a taxicab," Margaret said to me. "No, not a taxicab, a hansom. We can see better from a hansom. Tell the driver to turn into Twenty-sixth Street and then to go very slowly east."

Luckily a hansom was within call. We were soon in Twenty-sixth Street, Margaret leaning over the apron of the hansom and looking anxiously first at one sidewalk, then the other. We had crossed First Avenue and were in sight of the dark mass of the Bellevue Hospital buildings when she suddenly exclaimed:

"There they are!"

## THIS WAY OUT

Looking in the direction she indicated I saw, standing beneath a lamp-post on a street corner, a middle-aged man of dignified and gentle appearance and a young woman in an evening cloak, bare-headed, with her arms full of red roses, who answered to the description supplied by Alice Bennett of her sister. She seemed in great agitation. Margaret directed the driver to draw up to the sidewalk and to wait. She was out of the hansom before it had fairly stopped.

As she drew near the girl she said in a low, clear voice:

“Jean Bennett.”

At the sound of her name Jean turned in astonishment but laid a detaining hand on the man's arm, as if she feared he would escape.

“I am a friend of your sister's,” Margaret explained, “and I've been searching for you because your absence from the Eagle Theatre is endangering the success of the play. Your sister is very much agitated over your leaving in this mysterious way. You must come back at once before the third act is on.”

The girl began to tremble. She looked

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

piteously at the figure beside her, who stood with a blank, patient expression, as if awaiting the opportunity to slip away.

"This is my father," she said. "I left the theatre to buy roses for Alice at the last minute and as I came out of the florist's I found myself face to face with him. He disappeared five years ago suddenly — without explanation. He had always been such a loving father that we thought of only two things that could account for his disappearance, either he had been killed or he had forgotten who he was, as people do sometimes. He doesn't know me — even now!"

Her voice ended in a sob which seemed to distress her companion, for he looked appealingly at us at the same time speaking in one of the strangest voices I have ever heard, as faint and far-off as if it issued from the lips of a specter in some fading dream.

"This young lady seems to know me. I do not know her. I am very sorry."

"You see I was only thirteen when he went away," Jean explained. "When I say 'Jean' he thinks of a little girl with curls."

"What is your name?" Margaret questioned.

## THIS WAY OUT

He looked troubled, shook his head, remained silent.

"Isn't it — Charles Bennett?" his daughter said.

"Charles Bennett — Charles Bennett," he repeated; but again shook his head as if in doubt.

"Will you come with us?" Margaret said in a soft, entreating voice. "We are friends of yours."

"Why, yes, I will come with you," he said, at the same time glancing down at his clothes, which were weatherworn, as if he doubted whether he was fitly garbed for her society.

I sent the driver to pick up a taxicab. Jean was now clinging to Margaret, her face pale with conflicting emotions.

"It was so good of you to come out to find me. Poor Alice always believed that it was a case of loss of identity with Father — and I suppose she feared something of the kind had happened to me. Do you think he will ever know us?" she added in an imploring voice.

"Some word, some phrase may suddenly bring him back," Margaret replied. "These cases where the nerve centres are affected are very

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

strange. I should think that the sight of your sister acting might restore to him the sense of his identity. She was on the stage at the time when he disappeared?"

"Oh, yes! and he was so proud of her! She'll be overjoyed."

"Is it best to do more than let her know you're back — until after the last curtain?"

Jean reflected. "Perhaps you are right."

While this conversation was going on, Charles Bennett, nameless to himself, a victim of some obscure visitation, the dupe of nerves which had perhaps endowed his daughter with her singular genius, this man unrelated even to the vast environment of the city about him, stood watching us with the same patient, frustrated look. He let us put him in the taxicab, sinking silently into his place — with no interrogation. Jean, watching him with an expression of mingled anguish and joy, seemed racking her brain for some signal of recall to the blinded memory. Suddenly she leaned over to Margaret and said in a low voice:

"Alice sings a song in the third act. Will you go behind the scenes and ask Peter Fremwell to let Alice substitute a song called 'Blue Butter-

## THIS WAY OUT

flies' for the one she uses? The butterfly song was a favourite of Father's. She needn't be told why — but you can explain to Mr. Fremwell."

At the theatre, at Margaret's suggestion, I sent in for the physician who had attended Alice and as quickly as possible we explained the situation to him. Fortunately, the friend who occupied the seat next to him had been called away, and Doctor Fleming promised to take Charles Bennett to his seat and to watch him closely during the remainder of the play. Meanwhile Margaret saw Fremwell and told him the reasons for our request, Alice having already been informed that her sister was in the theatre. He went himself to Alice to authorize the change, Margaret accompanying him. She said she never saw a human being so vivified as Alice Bennett after she had learned of her sister's return, Margaret having given as the cause of Jean's absence only her desire to buy flowers for the occasion.

"Of course, it's Jean who wants me to sing 'Blue Butterflies,'" she said gaily. "You're very kind to let me, Mr. Fremwell."

"I hope you will reward me in the third act,"

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

he said grimly. "So far you are a disappointment, Alice Bennett."

When the curtain went up we were all in our places. It was a pity that one of the finest pieces of acting Alice Bennett ever did was wasted on Margaret, on Jean Bennett, on an innocent physician involved in our little drama, and on myself. We didn't watch the play. We couldn't! We only watched the poor, patient creature who sat dazed and wondering in his chair by Doctor Fleming's side, his blue eyes following the drama, unlighted by any recognition of the daughter who played in it. The time came at last for the song. I transcribed it afterward, and here it is:

Blue butterflies that on faint wings  
Float where the azure myrtles creep,  
Out of what dream-land came you forth,  
Return you to what sleep?

Perchance you flew from faery-realms,  
Where the lost princess scans the skies  
For tidings of her Love, until  
At dawn the old moon dies.

Perchance your souls will change to flowers,  
In sunny glades or shaded spots,  
Where lovers bend with linked hands  
To pluck forget-me-nots.



## THIS WAY OUT

Alice sang through the first verse before the melody seemed to reach the numbed ears of Charles Bennett, but I observed an intense stillness in his attitude. Then gradually over his worn features spread a light that I can compare to nothing but to the dawn coming, as it does in the South, with a kind of divine swiftness. Uttering a muffled cry, he half rose.

“Alice!”

His voice reached only the people just about him, and instantly the physician had pulled him gently down.

“Wait until the play is over, Mr. Bennett,” he said.

Afterward Alice sent for us. We found her literally in the arms of her family, while Fremwell the Hun hovered in the background, waiting for a word with her — looking meek for a Hun. It proved several months later to be the word which presages a wedding.

The next day I mailed Margaret a clipping from a review of “Count Your Change,” a glowing eulogy written by a man usually dejected over plays,

“Fremwell for once was beaten at his own

## PETER FREMWELL'S LEADING WOMAN

game. His leading woman, by her performance in the third act, saved 'Count Your Change.' "

Underneath I wrote in comment:

" But the leading woman, back of the leading woman — what praise hath she? "

Margaret's reply was characteristic:

" I had the good fortune once to know what tricks tired nerves can play one. That seems to me the only use of passing through uncomfortable experiences — to help the undergraduate! "



### **CHAPTER III**

**“DIAMOND, DIAMOND, WHO HAS THE  
DIAMOND?”**



### CHAPTER III

“DIAMOND, DIAMOND, WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?”

**T**HE moment of high courage which had enabled me to bridge the conventions and declare to Margaret Carpenter that she was even superior to her “tradition,” the inspired moment had, as a matter of course, its sober afterthoughts — not in my mind, but in hers. It was quite natural that the wonder and the illumination were so far all mine. To her I was, perhaps, a serviceable friend discovered in the nick of time for the uses of the hour, but the necessity of service at an end no glamour, I feared, survived to plead my cause.

Yet she did not entirely repulse me, for she possessed the kind of sympathy which believes in another’s faith, and since my faith was now so completely centred in her it seemed inevitable that we should go on in the key in which we had begun, not retracing our steps toward formality.

## THIS WAY OUT

Since if she had not said yes she had at least refrained from negatives, I had confidence that my probation might end in our mutual happiness.

We were often together at concerts, or driving in the park, or attending some art exhibition, these occasions always leaving me with a quite divine sense of satisfaction; yet, recalling them, I couldn't remember that she had said anything brilliant or original. But then she was not in the least a "mental" woman. All her qualities seemed fused in a restful charm.

It was through Margaret that I received my invitation to one of Pennell Bushman's famous Saturday evening suppers in his studio on West Tenth Street; for her circle was gradually interpreting our friendship in a way most favourable to my interests. So it came to pass that I was often invited to houses previously unknown to me, since lawyers and artists move as a rule in different orbits.

Bushman's studio, with its collection of rarities from many sources, was a little universe in itself. He had knocked about the world a good deal, since all women who could afford him, from the Czarina to the wife of a Chicago millionaire,

## “WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?”

wanted him to paint their portraits — why, I didn't quite understand, for he had a kind of brutal directness in depicting characters on canvas, always refusing to be sugary at the expense of truth and sometimes declining a sitter at any price.

These fortnightly suppers of Bushman's were famous because formality and dignity were made subsidiary to a genial blending of many diverse elements — society women and débutantes, artists, writers, professional women, struggling aspirants for fame, and those who had found how little fame is worth. The studio was a fusing furnace, receiving them all and generally blending them all in one bright flame of enjoyment before the evening was over. It is a rare host who can control the composite soul of his guests! Bushman possessed this magic, yet he entertained them only with trifles. Did you pick up a curiously carved ivory? Well, there was a story attached, a tale so extended that the threads, crossing mountains and seas, tapestried at last in a gleaming Indian temple at the foot of some carbuncled god.

So it would drift on while people consumed the



## THIS WAY OUT

excellent food or, leaving their places, climbed a gallery because a wonderful glimpse of purple had attracted them, or some marble by Rodin. Everybody did as he or she liked — except on this one notable evening, when a common apprehension drew us all into a circle.

People who sat near me had been audibly conjecturing what the surprise of the evening would be, for Bushman, it seems, always produced something from his sleeve. On a preceding occasion it had been a dancer as beautiful as a Tanagra figurine; and the time before that an East Indian juggler, who made roses bloom out of the guests' salt cellars, and performed other tricks of astral floriculture. I cared little what the surprise of the evening was since I had had mine, just to be there with Margaret.

Yet I enjoyed the scene with its setting of Venetian splendour, a gallery tapestried with weaves from Flemish looms, the railing hung with rare honey-coloured brocades, while the light sifted everywhere upon us as if through honey.

Nearly opposite to me at the table sat a pretty girl whom Margaret appeared to know very well, for she asked her questions which indicated a

## “WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?”

close degree of intimacy with the girl's family, addressing her as Phyllis, a name I thought delightfully suitable to the dainty creature, who was dividing her attentions between the man at her right, whom I did not like, and the man at her left, whom I did, so easily are we misled by appearances! The man at her right I knew well by reputation, Basil More, a good-natured, eccentric spendthrift who delighted in being lazy when other people were working and being awake when they were asleep. If I had heard no definite evil of him I had at least heard little to his credit. But Phyllis Mayfield's neighbour on her left, Charles Little, was as cold, clear, and correct a young man as ever went his way calmly through the jungle of New York.

“What's the surprise of the evening?” someone murmured near us. Margaret turned to me with a charming smile.

“My host has asked me to tell fortunes,” she whispered. “I am afraid they'll be disappointed. They want something more unusual.”

“You'll make a novelty of it if any one can,” I replied.

Bushman was at that moment showing some

## THIS WAY OUT

unset precious stones to his guests with his customary indifferent manner, as if he were saying:

“Here are some things that drifted my way.” For a man who possessed so much he had less of the spirit of ownership than any one I ever knew, being always detached and nonchalant toward his accumulated beauties, as if they were lent him and he were really seeking the unseen loveliness they symbolised.

“What a diamond!” I heard some one exclaim.

Margaret and I turned our eyes toward our host, who was leaning back in his high carved chair, looking reflectively at a great yellow diamond in his hand like the soul of some golden vintage celebrated æons ago on those lost islands which are on no known map — the isles called Blessed. The guests nearest to Bushman were clamouring for a closer view of this honey-yellow stone, and a woman asked for its history.

“I should rather know its future than tell its past,” Bushman replied, “because, you see, this isn’t really a diamond. It’s a heart!”

As he spoke I thought that he glanced toward Phyllis Mayfield, but she was listening to

## **"WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?"**

Charles Little with a strained expression, as if what he said was not altogether pleasing to her.

"How I should like to win that heart," a pretty woman murmured, while another said gaily:

"Let's call the magic diamond Honey Prince."

"And let Honey Prince have a royal progress around the table," said the first speaker with enthusiasm.

For answer Bushman slipped the stone deftly into the palm of his nearest neighbour, saying with a laugh, "Hold fast what I give you!"

The childish game was taken up merrily, each person as he or she passed the stone along, uttering the same formula. It came to Margaret at last and lay for a moment like a great irregular drop of sunny light in the rosy curve of her palm; then she slipped it into my hand, saying, "Hold fast what I give you!"

"If it is a heart I will," I replied, making up in fervour what my remark lacked in originality, and then I passed Honey Prince on, and he was received with acclamation and delight.

But the magician host was already directing a new diversion. A little clown dressed like

## THIS WAY OUT

Watteau's "Gilles" had slipped from behind the arras, and as he danced to a melancholy song that might have floated from Old France he was joined by a whirling rose in chiffon, her hair powdered and coiffed close as in Nattier's portraits of the little court ladies of Versailles. We all watched them in absorbed silence as against the waving tapestry which seemed the background of some forgotten tale of chivalry, their slight, lithe figures swayed and passed and returned with harmonious interaction, their little hands signalling, their dainty feet moving with charmed rhythm to this old French song.

Suddenly the plaintive strings became dumb and the little clown and the diminutive dancer melted like shadows into the arras again, leaving a faint odour in the air of sandalwood and dried flower petals.

It was done so perfectly that it became immediately unreal, so no one called "encore"—as well bid back a dream!

"Did Marie Antoinette send them?" a woman asked, and then the spell being broken a hum of conversation arose, in the midst of which a voice was heard exclaiming:

## **"WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?"**

**"Where's Honey Prince? We haven't seen him! Who has him?"**

Every one looked at his or her neighbour, then one after another said, "I passed it on" or, "I remember you did," until the reiteration resembled a row of child's blocks falling together. It had swept the table as far as Phyllis Mayfield, who lifted her head with a proud gesture and repeated the formula which from "Hold-fast-what-I-give-you" had become "I-passed-the-diamond-on."

But Basil More didn't give back the antiphon "I remember-you-did." A hush had fallen upon the company, as we were all waiting to hear what he would say; and I think in that instant the same suspicion seized all of us like the plague. It was too appropriate that Honey Prince couldn't get by this money-waster who was chronically in debt.

He seemed to be aware that we were regarding him with unfriendly interest and that something decisive and explanatory was expected of him, for a dull flush overspread his forehead. He winked rapidly as if embarrassed.

**"I didn't pass the diamond on," he said at last.**

## THIS WAY OUT

A little murmur went through the company, for following on the heels of Miss Mayfield's declaration that she had passed the diamond on this was tantamount to declaring that the stone was in his possession.

"Where is it then?" some joker challenged.  
"Is Uncle a connoisseur of gems?"

A little murmur of protest went down the table, for the rash speaker had chosen that most inappropriate moment for a jest—the instant when the improbable seems possible.

"I don't know where it is," More said coolly, for he had recovered his self-possession. "I only know I didn't pass it on."

It may have been my fancy but it seemed to me that for one instant Phyllis Mayfield looked frightened, as if the very proximity of a man who had stopped the progress of the diamond made her apprehensive, but More only reiterated his statements with a smile. He hadn't passed it on and he didn't know where it was.

Bushman had become aware by this time that the diamond was missing, but being an amiable host he seemed not in the least perturbed, giving the impression, indeed, of a man who lost

## **“WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?”**

diamonds and found them again as he might mislay a penknife and then soon recover it.

“We have a mystery to complete the evening,” a little widow twittered. “I think we ought to cross-examine Mr. More and Miss Mayfield. She declares she gave him the diamond. He says he didn’t pass it on. He does not say he received the diamond.”

It was a daring challenge, but she sent it forth as the airiest badinage. More turned with a little enigmatical smile to Phyllis Mayfield, who seemed distinctly annoyed by the turn affairs had taken. Charles Little, who had been silent all this time, seconded the proposition for the Third Degree; but Bushman now interposed with a host’s authority.

“I am to blame for starting ‘Hold-fast-what-I-give-you.’ It is so easy to let a stone slip out of the hand when passing it. Suppose we look under the table.”

We all got up, shook out our napkins and drew back our chairs, and, as if in a sudden access of self-consciousness, we all began to do the silly things people usually do when a general search is on, looking into the most impossible places. But



## THIS WAY OUT

Honey Prince had either hidden himself successfully or had been appropriated. In the midst of our vague fumbings the widow chirped again like a little bird.

"Did you receive the diamond, Mr. More? You never told us that."

More hesitated just an instant before he replied, "Yes."

I saw Margaret look searchingly at him; then she turned to me.

"I have a theory," she said.

"So have I!"

"What's yours?"

"That's telling," I laughed. "On the way home we'll talk."

"Oh, it will be all over by that time."

"Will it!" I exclaimed.

"If I'm the proper kind of a fortune-teller, yes."

Basil More's answer had the effect of making people feel thoroughly uncomfortable. He had received the diamond, he hadn't passed it on, and he seemed not in the least inclined to account for it. If this were theft its boldness was superlative!

## “WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?”

What Bushman was thinking no one could tell, for he seemed to have dismissed the subject of the diamond altogether. He was relating to one of his neighbours an adventure he had had in Russia when painting a grand duchess. The cue was unmistakable. We all discontinued our search. Phyllis took her seat again and began talking to Charles Little. More lit a cigarette and gazed into vacancy.

Bushman made a signal at last to a footman, who brought forth a gorgeous mandarin robe of ethereal blue embroidered with sea gulls and lilies. The host, taking it from him, walked down to Margaret.

“Here’s your robe of office,” he said gaily, “and your tent of divination is awaiting you yonder.”

As he slipped it over her shoulders he bent a little nearer to her. He had known Margaret since they were both children.

“Do you suspect one of the servants?” he said in a low voice.

“I suspect no one,” she replied.

“It was to have been hers,” he murmured.

Margaret rose then and stood for a moment

## THIS WAY OUT

prominently in view, her wonderful cloak completely covering her evening gown. Bushman went back to his place, but the thrill of agitation in his voice showed me how much anxiety was concealed beneath his outwardly calm bearing. In fact no one was thinking of anything but the diamond, though at the wave of a hand we had all ceased our searching.

The host announced that Mrs. Carpenter was to tell fortunes and every one clapped, for it seemed that Margaret had won fame at a certain fashionable bazaar by reading palms, though I suspect that her natural intuition did her splendid service in interpreting character. What happened within the tent on this evening she told me afterward. This is the story:

The guests went in and were detained, some a longer and some a shorter time, but every one seemed very merry on emerging. I learned from Margaret afterward that it was one of her rules to tell only pleasant things to the inquirer. If she honestly thought he would some day be wealthy she told him so; and if the marriage lines were very distinct in a girl's hand she prophesied a wedding.

## **"WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?"**

Margaret said that the order in which the actors in this little drama entered was one of the most fortunate things that ever happened; for otherwise she could scarcely have turned the course of events as she did. Phyllis Mayfield came first.

"Is that you, my child?" Margaret inquired.

"It is I, Mrs. Carpenter, and I want to know a great many things."

Phyllis seated herself on a little stool at Margaret's feet, peering through the twilight rather nervously, her hands clasped about her knees.

"What do you want to know?" asked my lady.

Phyllis extended her palm — a pink, trembling palm.

"Do you see anything in my hand?" she faltered. "Wait — the heat has made me dizzy. Let me sip this a minute."

Margaret noticed that she had brought her after-dinner coffee cup in with her. She drank nearly all the coffee before holding out her hand again. Margaret, touching her fingers, found them icy.

"Aren't you well, dear?"

## THIS WAY OUT

"Quite — but, I'm worried. Please look in my palm. Please tell me what you see."

"Phyllis, you are taking this too seriously. It is all supposed to be a jest."

The girl continued to hold out her hand, which trembled. Margaret had only her conjectures, but she acted upon them.

"There are several young men in your life," she said; "and they do not all make you happy."

"That's true," Phyllis exclaimed.

"There's a dark man with clear, cool features, who is helping to complicate matters for you; a fair man who is in love with you, and,"—she paused impressively,—“another man, neither dark nor fair, who is very — chivalrous.”

Phyllis made a motion of astonishment.

"He is so chivalrous," Margaret continued, "that rather than any blame should rest on a woman he admired he would deliberately lie."

Phyllis gazed at her as still as if she had been a statue, but with a puzzled look, as if she did not understand in the least what Margaret meant.

"You don't see an unfortunate marriage, do you? — a marriage I may have to make to save — Oh, I must tell you. I can't tell Mother, for it

## "WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?"

would nearly kill her, and Father would —"

She broke off. Her agitation had communicated itself to Margaret, but to the latter's infinite relief what she feared most was not the cause of Phyllis's trembling and tears.

"It's my brother Howard," she went on. "He — he's taken money from the Water Street Bank, ten thousand dollars; and unless something is done soon it will all become known."

"Did Howard tell you this?" Margaret asked.

"He has admitted it, but it was Charles Little who first told me. You see, he — he wants to marry me."

"And so, I suppose, wishes this covered up."

"That's just what he doesn't wish — unless I promise — to marry him. He wants to force me to say yes, to save Howard. He hasn't put it into so many words, but I know what he means. He's wealthy, you know, and could replace the money. All through supper he has been suggesting this and telling me how dreadful exposure would be, until I've been nearly distracted. I was afraid people would notice."

"But how did he learn it in the first place?"

"Howard tried to borrow money of him to pay

## THIS WAY OUT

back the bank, and Charles Little wormed out of him what he wanted the ten thousand for, but he didn't lend him the money. Charles is using this information as a hold on me — and I don't know what I shall do, Mrs. Carpenter. I can't marry Charles Little even to get Howard off."

"No! and he shouldn't get off — unless he pays the price of his ransom; otherwise, he'd never learn his much needed lesson."

Margaret wondered if the girl in her desperation had committed a theft to save her brother; but there was little in Phyllis's manner to warrant suspicion. Mrs. Carpenter ventured to say however:

"Have you any scheme — to save Howard?"

"I have dozens, but I don't see the end of any of them; there's always a block somewhere."

"Yes; an alien duty is dangerous! This was not your problem, and it has been made your problem. You'll have to be very careful, Phyllis. We make bad mistakes sometimes in helping those dear to us, because we can't view them with justice as we would a stranger. You must be very careful, Phyllis."

She uttered these words solemnly and im-

## “WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?”

pressively, but the girl's clear eyes showed no trace of embarrassment, no consciousness of guilt. Margaret was puzzled, for she was convinced that the secret of the diamond's disappearance lay between Basil More and Phyllis.

Comforting the young girl with a promise to see what she could do to help her, she dismissed her and awaited the next visitor, who proved to be Charles Little himself. With his usual cool and correct manner he saluted the sibyl, then held out his palm silently. Margaret studied it with more than an assumed interest. Having known both his father and mother she was in a position to supplement her surface estimate of his character by her acquaintance with his progenitors.

“You will be successful, dominant, and a power — of a sort — among your fellows,” she began her prophecy. “You will not marry until rather late in life.”

She saw him wince a little.

“Your powers of divination are keen, Mrs. Carpenter,” he said drily. “It is a pity you cannot use them to discover the missing diamond.”

“Perhaps I can, Charles,” she answered.



## THIS WAY OUT

"But I am as much interested in saving Howard Mayfield as I am in recovering the stone."

"Phyllis has let it out about Howard, then!" he exclaimed. "I don't know why she did that — when — when she had taken things into her own hands."

"What do you mean!" demanded Margaret, for a certain timbre in his voice seemed almost like an implication of Phyllis's guilt.

"I mean that — that —" he began to stammer. "I mean she'd go to any lengths to save her brother."

"I know she would do nothing — dishonourable to save her brother."

"I'm not so sure," he gave back.

"Are you accusing her of anything?" Margaret said sharply.

Little remained silent.

"I am afraid you are adding to her distress," Margaret commented.

"But Howard Mayfield deserves to be punished."

"Justice is easy enough," Margaret said. "The mercy which both punishes and helps the sinner is far more difficult."

## **"WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?"**

"You admit, then, he is in need of punishment."

"I certainly do; but there are punishments which, being too public, make reformation forever impossible."

Little shrugged his shoulders. "If I keep silent I share his guilt. I am a stockholder in the bank."

"Well! Be sure your logic ends there," Margaret returned. "Don't mar your integrity by making your proclamation of another's guilt dependent upon your personal desires."

"Phyllis treated me very badly. She led me on, or at least accepted my attentions — and now —"

"Be a good loser," Margaret interrupted.

It was then that he spoke sincerely and from the heart. If his character was rigid and scrupulous he had some of the qualities of his defects.

"Mrs. Carpenter," he blurted out. "I've been deeply shocked by something I witnessed at the supper to-night. I can't bear to suspect what I have to of — Phyllis."

Margaret looked anxiously at him, her heart

## THIS WAY OUT

heavy. "Don't say anything unless you are sure," she warned him.

"I'm too sure. I saw her — secrete the diamond. Howard had better be arrested on the spot to save her from folly. She'd give the gem back if his case was hopeless. I know her well enough to know whom she did it for — that sneak of a brother."

"Whatever your evidence, I can't accept the interpretation you put upon it," Margaret said. "I don't want to know what you saw or what you think, Charles, but I do want your promise to keep quiet until I can talk to you later. You'd better go now, or they'll suspect something."

He left her in a tumult of anxiety and perturbation, scarcely able, as she said to me afterward, to collect her thoughts, to plan her next move. Her keenest desire was to save both these children, both Howard and Phyllis, for their own sakes, for their parents' sakes. Howard had gotten into trouble, of that there was no doubt, but Phyllis — it was impossible to believe wrong of her unless it was wrong done suddenly and impetuously for her brother's sake. It must be cleared up. But how?

## “WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?”

Basil More arrived next, Basil, the unprofitable, whose chivalry had confirmed only too well this dreadful accusation made by Charles Little. The newcomer wore his usual air of cheerful pessimism and tolerance for a world which had small tolerance for him. Margaret said that the moment this misprized individual entered he inspired her with confidence, as battered people often do, because their own shortcomings make of them helpers rather than critics.

Margaret was cognisant of the fact that Basil in his day had handled a good deal of money. He could both make it and spend it, but he didn't know how to keep it. His talent for spending money, Margaret argued, would make him sympathetic with Howard's story, his talent for making money might open some solution to his mind, and through his to hers.

She examined his hand, then dropped it suddenly.

“This is child's play, Mr. More! I am very anxious. I must ask you some questions.”

“Don't,” he said quietly, while his eyes looked steadily into hers.

She knew, then, that he was thinking of Phyl-

## THIS WAY OUT

lis. Margaret's immediate impulse was to provide an excuse for the girl so that Basil should not believe that she would commit a sordid theft for her own sake.

"Mr. Moore," she said, "Phyllis Mayfield's brother has gotten himself into trouble. He has taken money — ten thousand dollars, I believe, — from the bank where he is employed. Exposure is threatened. What shall we do?"

Basil considered a moment. "I thought that boy was showing too much money this winter. You see, we belong to the same clubs. I've tried to keep him out of card games because —" He paused, growing very pink.

"Because you admire his sister, as we all do," Margaret finished.

His colour deepened. "Admiration is too slight a word, Mrs. Carpenter. But I'm glad you've told me this. It explains —" he hesitated.

"Never mind what it explains," she said quickly. "We must save Howard, first. Can you suggest anything? Do you know of any one who'd be willing to replace that money, and then put Howard under bonds to work it out?"

## **"WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?"**

**"He oughtn't to be in the city at all," Basil said.**

**"But we haven't time to discuss where he should or shouldn't be."**

**"If it bears on the subject we have, Mrs. Carpenter," he replied quietly. "I'll tell you what's in my mind. I have just sold the house on the Avenue that Uncle Van Tyck left me, and I am negotiating for a ranch out West, for I'm sick of New York. If this boy would be willing to go out there and work for me, and I think that under the circumstances he'd be willing to do anything, I'll advance this money, and his people could pay me the interest until he repaid the capital."**

**Margaret said that as he spoke it all grew so beautifully lucid and reasonable that she already saw Howard Mayfield working out his salvation in the broad freedom of a ranch, New York and its temptations two thousand miles away; but she wondered if this lover would be like the other, placing the deed over against the reward. She said:**

**"Phyllis would be so grateful, but —"**

**"I would never ask her to show her gratitude," he interrupted. "I'd be glad to serve her, to**

## THIS WAY OUT

help her in any way. We must help her," he added impulsively, "to-night."

"I saw her pass you something," Margaret said, taking advantage of the opening. "What was it?"

For answer he unclosed his palm. Within it lay a lump of sugar, a rather large lump of the rock-crystal sugar which Bushman always had served with the black coffee.

Margaret stared at it in silence a moment, then she gave a laugh of relief.

"Don't you see! Oh, don't you see!"

The fortune-telling was over. We had all settled ourselves for the next diversion, whatever it should be, though the pleasure was out of the evening for most of the company. The fact that the diamond was still missing made us feel as if Pennell Bushman's studio was only a glorified cell. He himself seemed slightly depressed, despite his efforts to appear amused and interested. I noticed that he declined to have his fortune told, remarking:

"There's only one thing I want, and if I can't get it, other events don't matter."

## **"WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?"**

**"Is it the diamond?"** some one said.

**"It is not,"** he replied emphatically.

It was then that Margaret appeared in the door of the tent and addressed him.

**"Sir Host, since you'll not come to me, I must come to you. My powers of divination tell me that the diamond is beneath the rim of your plate. Raise it and see!"**

Amid a breathless silence he raised it. There lay Honey Prince! A murmur of wonder and satisfaction went about the table. Some one near me said:

**"It was all a joke, of course."**

**"Too severe a joke in my opinion,"** was another guest's rejoinder.

A month later I heard that Howard Mayfield had gone West to assume charge of a ranch belonging to Basil More. Taking tea with Margaret that day, she called my attention to a newspaper item which stated that Pennell Bushman had sold his famous yellow diamond to a London firm of jewellers.

**"I make but one thing of that,"** she com-



## THIS WAY OUT

mented, "the lady it was offered to refused both it and Pennell Bushman."

"And by the same token Phyllis Mayfield is planning to join her brother and help him work out his salvation," I said with a smile. "Don't you think the time is come to tell me how the diamond was returned to Bushman?"

"I instructed a servant to put it under his plate."

"But how did you get it?"

"I will tell you the rest — you know it nearly all! When I saw the lump of sugar in Basil More's hand, I knew what had happened, and I looked about for Phyllis's demi-tasse. She had left it in the tent, sure enough, some coffee in it, a thing she never would have done if she had been planning a theft. I took the spoon and lifted out — the diamond. In the agitation into which Charles Little had thrown her she had evidently dropped the gem into the cup in place of sugar and passed the lump of sugar which she had taken with her fingers from the bowl, and held for a moment with the diamond, to her next neighbour, More. It was simple enough."

"And Charles Little saw her do it."

## **"WHO HAS THE DIAMOND?"**

**"Evidently."**

**"Why didn't he call her attention to it?"**

**"I imagine he wanted to play rescuer later on, but he missed his opportunity, More having seized it. As for Phyllis, she doesn't know to this day that she sweetened her coffee with a jewel envied by two continents."**

**"And More?"**

**"All he knew was that she had passed him a lump of sugar; but he held it fast as she told him, and that gave me the clue. I think she'll give him something even sweeter some day," Margaret concluded musingly, "her heart, perhaps. Those three young people will do well on that ranch, I prophesy."**

**"Still reading the future? Oh, tell me! What do you see for me?"**

**"Saints, sinners, and happy people live in the present," she gave back.**

**"Happy people can be even happier," I urged, leaning toward her, anxiously.**

**"I agree with you," she said, smiling.**



**CHAPTER IV**  
**NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG**



## CHAPTER IV

### NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

**A**S a lawyer I have opportunity to observe what meticulous details of daily living can act as separating factors between married couples, but never in all my experience, until the case of the Hendrickses was brought to my notice, had I known the ship of domestic joy to come near to foundering because of a dog — not full-grown at that.

The Hendrickses, John and his pretty wife Betty, were giving a week-end party at their old-fashioned house on Long Island and Margaret and I, both having known our entertainers for many years, were among the guests.

It was at dinner on the evening of our arrival that my subcutaneous self, that self common to us all which feels an east wind before it comes, detected a certain chill between our host and hostess. Something was wrong; something gen-

## THIS WAY OUT

erally is when people are too polite to each other, for a certain kind of courtesy is worse than an out-and-out scrimmage. It is as pointed as an icicle and just about as heart-warming; whereas a real quarrel arouses the feelings and is thereby much more likely to send people into each other's arms, she in tears, he in repentance and planning a theatre party. When people tell me they can't live together another minute because they quarrel so, I am morally certain they are almost too fond of each other to be separated a week. But elaborate courtesy has a nip of ice in it — and frozen things break apart.

Now Betty and John were in this ice armour, and the chill pervaded the table. I wondered what was up. Their entire disapproval of each other kept the moral temperature scarcely above freezing. It was as if Betty were saying, "Who is this frail reed that I have married?" and as if John echoed, "This delusive fair woman can't come it over my manly judgment. No, sir! I am a person of character and stability, not to be the object of feminine tyranny."

Margaret noticed it too, for once she whispered to me, "What is wrong with Sir John and Lady

## NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

Betty?" Not being able to answer the question and realising that the unhappy are often garrulous I awaited the hour of disclosures. It came toward midnight, when the guests, made prematurely sleepy by country air, had gone off to bed. Only Hendricks and I were left on the piazza. He was pulling at his pipe as a man does who has something on his mind, so I gave him leeway, respecting the signs of a coming confidence by keeping silence myself, and listening to the serenade of a tree toad mingled with the chirp of a cricket thrown out of its calculations by a recent cold spell.

After a while Hendricks spoke. Having been room-mates at boarding school he and I usually dispensed with prefaces. His utterance was not marked by great originality.

"I wonder if there's anything queerer than a woman!"

"Oh, lots of things," I reassured him,—“suburban time-tables, and why a half-empty car won't stop for you, and why a lost collar button turns a simple, obvious room into a dark, concealing cave, and why you wait half an hour at a restaurant for a milk and sandwich order. New



## THIS WAY OUT

York's full of things that are queerer than women."

This didn't seem to console Hendricks. He looked at the moon and at his pumps, and he smoked again furiously. Suddenly the night air was rent by a cry — the querulous whimpering cry of a puppy of the age for cuddling, who wants to be cuddled and says so.

"New dog?" I remarked.

"Yes — plague take him!"

"Is it so bad as that! Did he chew up your golf club or your slippers?"

"His diet is varied — includes soap, I believe, and the baby's rattle; but I wouldn't begrudge him anything in the house he might fancy — if Betty and I could hit it off again. The pup has been the rock on which we've split."

John was so many years older than Betty that I rather fancied they'd come to a deadlock some day, she offsetting his authoritative seniority with her strong will. I've observed that when two people are about to disagree anything will serve for a pretext, a postage stamp, or the nine-fifteen train, or the breakfast oatmeal — or a small dog!

## NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

"His lungs are good. I hope your guests are heavy sleepers. What's his name?"

"That's just it. We can't agree on a name. Betty wants to call him Ajax."

"Ajax! Oh, my soul!"

"I should say so! He's about as suggestive of Ajax as any other soft, tumbling thing. Betty says he'll grow into the name, for she thinks he's going to be a St. Bernard."

"Thinks! Doesn't she know!"

"Well, you see, the pup was given to us — and when people give away a dog it generally means that they're worried about what kind of a dog he'll turn out to be, and so hand the risk over to somebody else! Generally speaking, I think he'll be large and of wandering and unselected affections. He seems possessed of that abominable kind of good nature which makes man and dog of no account in a world of struggle." Hendricks rose. "Come, we must stop his howls."

On the way to the garage Hendricks still further elucidated the situation between himself and Betty.

"You may think it's queer for two people to draw daggers over the naming of a pup but, the

## THIS WAY OUT

fact is, this disagreement is symbolical. There comes a time when a man can't give in. To save his soul alive, he's got to be master for once in his own house. Now Betty is adorable — but she always wants her own way."

I could not repress a smile, for that seemed exactly the chief characteristic of John Hendricks. He was the best fellow in the world, but his desire to have his own way and his ability to get it were noticeable.

"It had come to the point," he continued sternly, "when I had to show her firmly that her word could not be always law. I wouldn't give in about the pup, and I had a plain talk with her on the subject of her self-will, which, I regret to say, hasn't mended matters a particle."

"Plain talks never do, John," I said. "As a person who has dealt with the fruits of plain talks in the office and the court I advise you to make your speech as elaborate and mysterious as possible. The moment people tell each other exactly what they think, trouble begins. The disguises are off, the pretty motley we live by is thrown aside, and the ugly bones beneath are labeled truth. I'm inclined to think the disguise is

## NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

nearer the truth, for it represents what we'd like to be."

"Dangerous doctrine! Well, here he is," Hendricks said, switching on the light in the garage.

As a test of domestic equilibrium he was laughable, this fluffy, squirming object, all paws and enthusiasm.

"Don! you silly!" Hendricks exclaimed.

"Oh, it's Don as over against Ajax, is it!"

"Yes, whatever else he'll be, he'll be a Don Quixote — always attempting the impossible and coursing the earth to do it. Look at those eyes. That pup's a visionary!"

"He certainly isn't Ajax."

"That's what I told Betty. She said she could read character in puppies as well as in people, and, of course, I had to say I didn't think her a very good judge of people and that made her cross, but worse happened."

"What?"

"She grew dignified," Hendricks said with a little sigh. "Now, I'm going to call this dog Don."

"I shouldn't."

"Would you call him Ajax and make yourself

## THIS WAY OUT

ridiculous to your neighbours? Would you do that?"

"No; I'd give him away. He isn't worth all this starch between you and Betty."

"He's a test case."

"I should say one test on which you've failed is a sense of humour, John Hendricks."

But Hendricks's jaw was set in approved see-it-through position. As a lawyer I dread more than anything else in people a determination to be consistent, or to stick by a foolish word as if there were merit in mere reiteration. To abandon a folly quickly seems the very essence of wisdom.

Hendricks fetched the unnamed one a puppy biscuit, and we left him having something between a meal and a frolic.

Next morning after breakfast I told Margaret of the household dilemma, and I wished that Betty could catch the contagion of her amusement over the matter.

"John is old enough to know better," she commented. "I've seen these test cases between wives and husbands, and parents and children, over nonessential matters, and nothing but

## NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

trouble and misunderstanding ever comes of them. Let us hope a new day will change the situation."

It did — and by an odd series of incidents which, viewed in retrospect, seem to prove that events sometimes arrange themselves better than the best laid plans can do.

During a tennis match in the forenoon Betty came to Margaret with her brows drawn together as if she were puzzling over some problem. In her hand she held a telegram.

"It's too provoking," she said. "Frances Colwell can't come! One of her family's ill; that girl is a perfect slave to her family. Who will take her place at auction to-night — and who will console Jack Blessington!"

The young man in question did not look at that moment much in need of consolation, for he was reducing his opponents to despair by his swift, sharp service at tennis.

"Was she meant to balance Jack?" Margaret inquired.

"Not only to balance but to fascinate him. I've told him that I have one of the prettiest, nicest girls he ever knew in store for him. I've

## THIS WAY OUT

teased him with the vaguest hints about her until he informed me half an hour ago that he had to play tennis to get her off his mind, that he simply couldn't wait until she came. Now I'll have to tell him that this wonderful person, like most wonderful persons, is to remain a legend."

I looked at Margaret and smiled, for I was reminded of the many years during which I was always just missing her — living on her "tradition" and an expectancy, which grew always sharper. The miracle was that she had exceeded hearsay and report!

"Don't tell him yet," Margaret advised, "for something may happen. Miss Colwell may see her chance to slip away and come at the eleventh hour."

"You're a consoling person, dear," Betty remarked, and just at that moment John came across the lawn. At sight of him his little wife looked a trifle prim.

"Have you seen Don?" he asked.

"You mean the pup Ajax," Betty replied.

"I mean the pup who destroys property by day and howls by night," John elucidated. "He is not in the garage and the gardener thinks he

## NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

has run off. I think the gardener is glad."

"Perhaps he couldn't bear the name you gave him," Betty said. "Perhaps he preferred to die far away from home rather than be called Don."

John did not look at her. After a moment's meditation he said:

"No; I think he knew he could never be an Ajax, and he preferred to drown himself rather than to disappoint you."

"Maybe he's trying to satisfy you both," I suggested.

"He's a brave dog to attempt that," Betty commented.

The light banter between husband and wife went on for a while longer, but I saw that it covered a certain soreness of spirit in them both. Secretly I hoped that the pup would lose himself effectually, so that he would cease to be a constant reminder of a trivial difference exaggerated out of all proportion by two over-sensitive people.

But the day wore on and Ajax or Don did not return. Miss Colwell had been expected to arrive at tea time; and I observed that when we were all seated about the tea table, which was



## THIS WAY OUT

placed upon the lawn, that young Blessington's eyes wandered toward the entrance gate.

"Where is she?" he asked Betty at last.

"Would some one else do as well?" Betty replied.

"That means there's a hitch somewhere. Isn't she coming — this prettiest, nicest girl in all the shires?"

"I'm so sorry. I've been keeping it from you all day. She can't come."

"Really? That's too bad!"

He spoke lightly, but I saw that he was just at the age to take delight in meeting a girl who had been so abundantly heralded. He looked disappointed.

"So you see," Betty went on, "one table of auction is broken up and things will be a little lopsided."

"Things couldn't be here," he returned gallantly. "Only there are so few 'prettiest, nicest' girls that a fellow naturally wants to meet one all certified to — especially by Mrs. Hendricks. She must be very fine."

"Oh, you'll meet her some day," she assured him.

## NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

"That 'nicest' girl — or some other," Margaret added. "There's always another, you know."

At that moment our attention was diverted by a singular object appearing in the near foreground, a tattered, battered, muddy dog, who had had the air of proclaiming, "I may not be dressed for afternoon tea but I've had the time of my life."

"Behold, the wanderer returneth," I said.

Betty gave a little cry of dismay.

"Ajax! You shocking puppy! Where have you been?"

"Don Quixote fell into a ditch," Hendricks said.

"He has a bone," said Blessington.

"It isn't a bone," Margaret remarked. "It looks like a slipper."

"Come here, Don," his master commanded.

"Come here, you little rascal."

The puppy came obediently, but the treasure he carried was evidently most dear to him for, instead of laying it at his master's feet, he frisked away when Hendricks reached out his hand to take what proved on nearer view to be a lady's

## THIS WAY OUT

pump, a black kid pump with a rhinestone buckle. In her excitement at sight of this object Betty quite forgot her usual dignity.

"Oh, John, take it from him! Oh, I'm so sorry! I hope he hasn't ruined it for somebody. I suppose he got into one of the bedrooms."

By this time Hendricks had seized the offending canine by the scruff of the neck and had pried open his mouth to make him drop his treasure which, beyond a scratch or two, seemed uninjured.

There is something in an article of clothing gone astray like this which, however commonplace, at once sets the mind working as to possibilities of ownership, which at once suggests mystery or adventure. And this particular shoe with its little rhinestone buckle was not commonplace, but bore about it a certain distinction as if its owner, whoever she was, had put her stamp upon it.

Hendricks held it up, but every woman present shook her head in a rather reluctant negative.

"It isn't mine," was echoed on all sides.

"It's a wise lady who knows her own foot-

## NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

gear," Hendricks said. "Are you sure this is not yours, Betty?"

"Far too grand to be mine."

"Let me see the maker's name," Margaret said, reaching out her hand; then, as she examined the shoe, "It's Ladd's make. He's the fashion with young girls now."

I often wondered how she knew all these things, but I suppose very little either in serious or trivial matters escaped her, and she was wise enough to know that the so-called trivial things of life often form the levers to move big events.

"Let me see the Cinderella slipper," Blessington said. "I wonder where on earth the pup picked it up!"

He turned the little shoe about and I could see that it held for him a certain quality of what youth loves most of all — romance and novelty and strangeness. As he sat balancing it in his hand he seemed eminently fitted for the part of prince in a Cinderella hunt. I thought this but, as usual, it was Margaret who set the ball rolling. She had been watching the puppy, the puppy of any breed you like, and he, the nameless one, had kept his soft, melancholy eyes fixed upon the

## THIS WAY OUT

trophy which he had brought with so much enthusiasm from parts unknown. To any one who understood and loved dogs it was perfectly evident that he had had an errand to perform, but wasn't quite satisfied with the way the Superior Race was dealing with his mission. Rising on his tired puppy legs he made one or two playful attempts to get the slipper out of Blessington's hand, but the latter held the prize out of reach.

"No, you don't, you awkward little squirmer. You're not fit to carry a lady's shoe, all mud as you are. Where did you get it? Who is she? Tell me!"

The pup gave some short barks, pitched, I thought in the minor key, then whined a little. Margaret, still studying him, spoke then:

"Why don't you ask him, Mr. Blessington, to take you to the lady?"

She must have read his thoughts, for he blushed to the roots of his hair and answered quickly:

"If he only could!"

"I think he can."

"You are joking, Margaret," Betty said.

"No, indeed! I've brought up many a puppy.

## NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

I think he wants something done. His mind isn't quite care free. When they run off and then run back to you it generally means that they wish you to follow."

"Have you the clue, puppy-dog?" Blessington said. "Lead on! I follow."

"Let's all go!" Betty exclaimed. "I always maintained he'd turn out a St. Bernard. Now, to make it a complete setting, we should have to plough through snowdrifts."

We made an odd procession as we straggled through the grounds, Blessington in the van with the shoe in his hand and the puppy frisking about him in an ecstasy, as if he were saying:

"It took me a long time to get it into the heads of the Superior Race that something ought to be done, but at last I have them started. I really wonder how they acquired their reputation for wisdom."

He led us a dance "thorough bush, thorough brier." Even Blessington, I think, would have become discouraged had it not been for Margaret's assurance that the puppy was really taking us somewhere.

We entered at last a wood, or rather grove of

## THIS WAY OUT

pine trees, and here our guide exhibited signs of great enthusiasm.

"We are getting warm, I think," Blessington remarked.

We were, in more senses than one, for the day was hot and we had walked a long distance. Suddenly the puppy darted forward with every symptom of joy. I looked, appraised, and made the mental comment:

"It must be the Lady of the Slipper!"

She was seated on the ground with a mass of wild flowers in her lap, which she appeared to have been sorting. Her feet were hidden by her white linen skirt. Her white silk blouse turned in at the throat only enhanced the natural fairness of her complexion. Her abundant fair hair seemed to have a light of its own. She had an expectant air, as if she had been waiting for us for hours. I saw that Blessington was captured, conquered, by the way he gazed at her, as if she were a princess out of a Maeterlinck drama, in linen skirt instead of some straight, narrow robe of faded silk.

Ajax bounded against her shoulder. Without rising she addressed us, this circle of strange peo-

## NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

ple, all looking at her with open admiration.

"He's a nice puppy. I knew he might be a long time, but he'd be sure to let some one know. You can trust a St. Bernard for that."

Betty could not resist a triumphant glance at John. Blessington advanced with the shoe.

"Is this yours?" he inquired.

"Yes, it's mine. I was walking through the wood when I wrenched my ankle tripping on a tree root that was half out of the ground, and down I went. I took my shoe off to ease my foot and just at that moment the puppy appeared, and the first thing he seized was my pump. I tried to make him give it to me and, when he declined, it occurred to me to send him away with it. We had quite a conversation before we really understood each other, but at last he knew that he was to go and fetch help. Yes, you were a good doggy!" she added, addressing the puppy.

"May I ask where you live?" Hendricks said, "that we may send word."

"My name is Marion Hale," she answered. "My father's name is Derwent Hale and we have taken the Lyon place for the summer."

"Derwent Hale!" Blessington exclaimed.



## THIS WAY OUT

"Why, I think he and my father were classmates at college."

The two were off at once comparing notes, talking with the rapidity and interest of people suddenly aware of being much pleased with each other, while the puppy cocked one ear as if he were saying:

"This is all my doing!"

"Well, I suppose we must send back for a motor," Hendricks said. "Blessington appears to have forgotten that the little lady should have her ankle attended to."

Margaret turned to Betty, having as usual formulated definitely in her mind what was still nebulous in the imaginations of those about her.

"Why do you look any further for your 'prettiest, nicest' girl! Here she is to make up the even number of your guests!"

"I wonder if her ankle is very bad," Betty said, and I saw that Margaret's suggestion appealed to her.

Blessington was at that moment assisting Miss Hale to rise. She slipped her foot into her shoe and stood a little unsteadily, holding on to a tree trunk for support.

## NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

"It doesn't hurt — so — very — much! I could limp around — but not walk far."

"You musn't walk a step," Blessington exclaimed, with an expression in his face which seemed to add, "I'd gladly carry you home, rather than you should walk."

It was then that Betty made her proposition, which we all echoed. Couldn't Miss Hale join the house party, seeing that Ajax had so politely introduced her? Word could be sent to anybody, anywhere. Anything could be fetched that she needed. It was unconventional, of course, but after that ridiculous puppy had broken the ice so successfully, why stand upon formality?

Marion Hale looked at Blessington, and something in his eyes revealed to me he had very quickly made up his mind that "the prettiest, nicest girl" was found at last, but he could scarce believe his good fortune.

"Do come," he said.

Then Miss Hale accepted Betty's invitation, "because it was such a delightful ending of an adventure."

But this story is of Betty and John, however, and not of a romance initiated by a puppy out for

## THIS WAY OUT

a day's roaming. I noticed that Betty was very quiet as we all went home an hour later by the prosaic high road in motors that Hendricks had sent down to bring us back, the entire party, including the dog.

Whatever was on her mind had now nothing to do with the success of her house party, for Miss Hale, at whose house we had stopped to explain the situation, was proving a delightful addition to our number.

If Betty had had her anxieties as a hostess during the day she was more than compensated that evening. Miss Hale, it transpired, played auction, so the game went forward with no one left out but Betty and John.

Betty, still very quiet, had some embroidery upon which she made a pretence of working when she was not watching her guests with the satisfaction of a hostess who sees things "going well." Hendricks was wandering about the rooms, looking at his little wife occasionally as if something was on his mind.

After a while, during a round in which I was dummy, he stepped for a moment into the hall, returning with the puppy on a lead. I saw that the

## NAMING JOHN HENDRICKS' DOG

hero of the afternoon's adventure had a paper in his mouth upon which was written, as I afterward learned, the following words:

"My name is Ajax, for I am a right valiant dog."

Hendricks led him, an embodied canine capitulation and no longer a test of domestic equilibrium, straight to Betty's knee. I saw her glance at the paper, then look up at her husband with one of those smiles which indicate a complete surrender.

"Dear," she said, "he's Don Quixote beyond all doubt. After this afternoon he couldn't be anything else,—rescuing ladies in distress! Oh, he's Don — and — and I was very silly."

He stooped and said something to her. I think he would have kissed her had they been alone.



**CHAPTER V**  
**THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL**



## CHAPTER V

### THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

#### I

**I** REMEMBER it as if it were yesterday — the flying rack of dun-coloured clouds above the vivid green landscape, the sombre length of the dreary house which only needed a black tarn near by to make it a second House of Usher. I remember the conception I had of this dwelling as a place shut out from the wholesome June world, because of the murder committed near its walls. The black shadow of the deed stretched across the domain like the umbrage of an impenetrable cypress.

But to begin at the beginning. I was in my office one morning when Margaret called me up to ask me if I could accompany her at once to Wildfell House, an estate on the Hudson owned by the famous and eccentric Timothy Wildfell, who had been struck down by an unknown hand. His ward, Henriette Maturin, who lived with him and



## THIS WAY OUT

who was a goddaughter of Margaret's, had sent a frantic appeal to her to come at once, as she was in great distress of mind over the dreadful crime, as well as over certain developments succeeding it.

Responding immediately to Henriette's appeal, we were soon in a train going up the river on the West-shore side, for Wildfell House was situated almost upon the brink of the Palisades. Crossing the ferry, she had told me a little of the history of Timothy Wildfell, at least that part of it correlated to the life of Henriette Maturin, who, it seems, was the only daughter of Wildfell's late business partner, motherless as well as fatherless, and consigned, upon her father's death, to the care of his associate in business. This arrangement, Margaret thought, was not favourable for the young girl's future, since Wildfell was of an antisocial and eccentric disposition, a man who went from his office directly to his library, where he burned the midnight oil over antiquated volumes which had survived, it seemed, for the benefit of but one reader. He was a bachelor, his nearest relative being his nephew, and, presumably, the heir to his fortune.

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

"Does his nephew live with him?" I inquired.

"He has lived with him several years — ever since the death of Maurice Wildfell's parents."

"What does this nephew do?"

"He is in an architect's office, I believe — this year!"

"Were he and his uncle — congenial?"

Margaret looked at me curiously, as if seeking to interpret my thoughts.

"I am afraid they were not. As I remember Maurice, he was of a rather dreamy, reserved, indolent temperament, while Timothy Wildfell had a cool, clear, cynical mind, completely pessimistic as to the general character of human beings. He always attributed virtue to self-interest and evil to the same source. I remember a saying of his, 'Each man is a top, spinning on his infinitesimal ego.'"

I glanced at the dark, impressive corrugations of the Palisades.

"In that case," I said, "a fall over those cliffs would be a mercy."

Margaret smiled.

"I don't believe in the top theory. I think we all progress — somehow; get better, somehow."

## THIS WAY OUT

But we had no time for further speculation. The ferryboat made her slip. At the station, a young girl came to meet us, whom Margaret introduced as Miss Maturin, in whom I detected traces of Celtic ancestry, for she was of the Irish type of beauty.

"You've come!" she cried, embracing Margaret, a note of intense relief in her voice. "Oh, I've longed for you so! It's dreadful at the house. The police are everywhere, and there's a detective who has put the servants into hysterics."

"It sounds like George Perrine," Margaret said. "I was staying at a country house once where he was called in to trace some missing jewels. We never forgave him, because one of the best cooks in the country had to go to jail, while we went dinnerless."

She talked on lightly, with the intention, I could see, of decoying the girl's thoughts from the tragedy at Wildfell. The facts furnished by the morning papers had been slight. Timothy Wildfell's nonappearance at dinner the night before was so contrary to his habits of clockwork punctuality that a search of the house and

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

grounds had been made immediately, which resulted in the finding of his body in a remote quarter of the estate. He was lying on his side, quite dead, with a wound in his temple which might have been made by a sharp stone. As he was known to be a sufferer from heart disease, the theory which first obtained was that, falling down in a sudden collapse, he had cut his head upon one of the stones which were scattered over the ground. This was almost at once abandoned, because upon the damp earth — there had been a recent shower — were found other footprints besides those of Wildfell's, but so confused and intermingled with his that they proved his death had not been accidental. The papers had all commented upon the fact that the murder — if murder it were — had been committed in full view of the highway. Though the place where the body was found was encircled by forest growth, at one point in the circle there was a broad opening which formed a kind of natural path to the main road, and made a vista affording an unobstructed view from highway to circle.

Henriette began to speak at last of the central figure of the tragedy.

## THIS WAY OUT

"He came home early from the office, and went out in the grounds for a stroll, though it was an uncertain afternoon, with showers coming up and going off again. Some vagrant must have come along and attacked him — though — though — Maurice went with him — part of the way."

"You mean," Margaret asked, "that they started out together?"

The girl had grown very pale. Her dark grey eyes were dilated with a terror she dared not face.

"Yes," she said faintly. "Maurice wanted to tell Mr. Wildfell of — of our engagement."

I saw Margaret press Henriette's hand, but she made no comment.

"Then they started out together, but —"

"They did not return together."

The girl's self-control suddenly gave way. Covering her face with her hands, she began to sob; then, as if ashamed of her weakness, she raised her head, with a proud yet pathetic confidence.

"Maurice says he left his uncle at the stone pagoda, but — but that dreadful detective —"

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

"I hope," Margaret interrupted, "that Perrine — if it is he — has done nothing hasty. Is Maurice at home?"

"Yes, he is at home. He wanted to come with me to meet you, but the man Perrine, oh, he has acted abominably — bullying the servants, accusing Maurice to the police of — of an unspeakable thing."

I reflected that this report of him did not indicate the Complete Detective, that smooth creation of the novelist, who lights cigarettes at strange moments, and visits the conservatories while the house is aquiver with apprehension; who jokes with the butler, "my dears" the maids, and who sits down for a game of chess with the suspected murderer after dinner.

That Perrine didn't at all correspond to this type we became aware, as the car went swiftly up the drive, by an altercation in loud tones between himself and one of the stableboys, in which one of the police force was also taking part. Silence fell upon the trio as our car approached, and when it stopped before the great entrance door, Perrine, dismissing his adversary with a nod, came forward, a solid figure, with eyes like fer-

## THIS WAY OUT

rets, an unimportant nose, and a large, heavy jaw. Upon beholding Margaret, he became immediately pensive and obsequious.

"Delighted to see you again, Mrs. Carpenter," he said, extending his hand, "though we meet under melancholy circumstances."

He couldn't have looked melancholy to save his life. He stood out, an incongruous figure, against the dark, mournful house, over which the grey clouds scudded. As I gazed at the sombre stone façade, I had my first real sense of the tragedy. Behind those stone walls lay Timothy Wildfell, cut off in midlife, with all his works unfinished; and for whose gain?

As we stood talking, a tall, gaunt young man sauntered out of the house and glanced first at Henriette before he came forward to greet us with a kind of impenetrable manner, as if he had, at the sight of us, put up his defences. But he seemed honestly glad to see Margaret, and for that I liked him.

He was, however, clearly unhappy and ill at ease.

The group soon separated, Henriette and Maurice strolling off together, while Mr. Perrine

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

drew Margaret and myself away for a confidential talk.

"The family lawyer, Mr. Curtis, has arrived," he said mournfully, "with the will, which does nothing to clear away the cloud which I fear is hanging over the head of the young man yonder. For the bulk of the property is left to him."

"In that case," Margaret replied, "all legatees are on the way to be murderers."

Perrine shook his head impressively.

"My dear madame, here's a young man who hasn't the faculty of getting on. I won't go so far as to say that he'll never succeed, but the cold fact remains that he hasn't. Now, this young gentlemen — we'll assume — is in love with somebody —"

"Why assume anything?" Margaret interrupted. "Isn't the mystery complicated enough without assumptions?"

"Motives — dear madam — are our stock in trade. Every act has a motive back of it. Life is made up of motives. Let us say an unsuccessful young gentleman wants to get married. He sees no way opening to him through his own efforts. He knows he is his uncle's heir —"



## THIS WAY OUT

"You are leaving out the most important thing of all," Margaret interrupted. "The man's character. Is he likely to murder his uncle by way of beginning a romance? Please set aside theories, Mr. Perrine, and give us facts."

"I have one fact that's indisputable," Perrine remarked. "Young Wildfell was the last person seen with his uncle. They started out together on this stroll from which Timothy Wildfell never returned alive, and one of the gardeners heard them quarrelling as they passed through a certain section of the grounds. Then they struck into the woods."

"Where is the stone pagoda?"

"In the woods—not far from where they struck in."

"So they were quarrelling," Margaret commented, "when they were last seen?"

"Sure!" Perrine said exultantly.

"A quarrel is just the thing to prevent murder, in my opinion. A man who has flung out hot words gets the poison out of his system. What else have you as evidence against this young man?"

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

"His shoes fit exactly into the foot-prints about the spot where Mr. Wildfell was found."

"Will you please take us there?" Margaret said. "My friend, Mr. Rittenhouse, is a lawyer, and he is as interested in this case as I am."

Perrine looked from one to the other of us. Whatever significance I had in his eyes was evidently because of Margaret's reliance on me, for she had the beautiful faculty of enhancing in the minds of others the value of any one associated with her. I could not but admire her attitude and bearing in the matter upon which we were engaged. Not a trace of undue excitement was in her manner, but a very deep realisation of the tremendous issues involved.

We followed the paths which Wildfell presumably had taken. The spot was indicated to us where he and his nephew had been overheard quarrelling, if high, heated, clashing voices are marks of a dispute. Then we entered the woods, coming soon to the small, clammy stone pagoda, which suggested less a pleasure arbour than a storehouse of rheumatism.

"These estates on the Hudson, founded in the

## THIS WAY OUT

sixties and seventies, always depress me," Margaret said, "with their black-walnut-trimmed houses—and grounds with dreary summer-houses where nobody ever goes; and that river, too broad and glaring to be companionable, flowing always before them. The Hudson is all very well on picture post cards, but to live by, oh, no!"

"And I dislike the Palisades," I said. "I know they are grand, but they always suggest copperhead snakes and sudden accidents to me."

We were by this time deep in the woods, Perine keeping always a little in advance of us.

"Have you evolved any theory yet?" I asked Margaret.

"My theory of the murder is that it was no murder at all, but heart failure following upon over-agitation. The cut is easily explained. Timothy Wildfell could very well have cut his head in falling, and that accident may have hastened his death."

"But the agitation? How do you explain that?"

"I have two theories: one that the engagement of his nephew to his ward was distasteful to him

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

because of Maurice's lack of business success; the other that Timothy Wildfell may have been in love with Henriette himself."

"But he was old enough to be her father!"

Margaret smiled.

"That would have made no difference. Whatever the exact cause of the agitation, I believe that in general it had something to do with the engagement, as Henriette herself said that Maurice accompanied his uncle on this stroll for the express purpose of telling him about it."

"I wonder what the young man's version of the quarrel is."

"He will have to give it, I suppose — sooner or later."

Suddenly the woods opened, and we found ourselves in a spot almost circular and of such symmetry of line that it suggested some long-ago attempt at landscape gardening. The trees, some of them scarcely more than shrubs, curved evenly about a plateau thickly scattered with small stones. Above the trees the towers of Wildfell Hall were visible. From one point in the circle a fairly wide path departed, leading direct to the main road.

## THIS WAY OUT

Perrine led the way triumphantly to the centre of the circle, and pointed to several footprints in the damp earth, cautioning us not to obliterate them with our own. Margaret looked at them, then toward the road.

"I refuse to believe that a man contemplating murder would choose this open spot to do it in. The occupants of any passing vehicle could have observed the deed — if it were done!"

"But he may not have contemplated it," Perrine said. "Men get suddenly angry, and do that which afterward nothing can undo."

"There are no footsteps leading from the spot."

"No. You see why?"

Margaret looked attentively at the ground.

"Moss?"

"Yes. Moss all around, and a perfect carpet of small stones; only earth and stones, without moss in the centre."

"I should like to view this opening from the road," Margaret said.

The view from the road gave the effect of looking up a vernal alley to a semicircular stage. Margaret shook her head.

"Too melodramatic to be real. Timothy Wild-

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

fell died there, but he wasn't murdered there. What did his nephew tell the coroner about the quarrel?"

"He said that his uncle objected to his engagement with Miss Maturin — because, as he put it, he had never 'made good' — that he parted from him in anger by the stone pagoda."

"I believe that," Margaret said. "What does Mr. Wildfell's doctor think?"

"He inclines to the heart-disease theory. But it seems to me more likely that Mr. Wildfell's nephew, in sudden anger, picked up a sharp stone and struck Mr. Wildfell with it."

"Then calmly went home?"

"Not at once, for then an alibi might have been proved. He walked for an hour in an opposite direction, he says, but unfortunately no one saw him. Then he came home — the best place for him if he wished to divert suspicion."

"I cannot see that even his returning home accomplished that," Margaret remarked dryly.

### • II

The atmosphere of romance hung like a dawn-lighted cloud about the pair, who, of all the peo-

## THIS WAY OUT

ple moving in and out, seemed more engrossed with each other than with the tragedy. I think they had only a minatory, intermittent realisation that a charge of murder had to be met by one of them. Between these glimpses down an ugly perspective they lived in a cosmos of their own.

I liked Maurice Wildfell — though he had to all but Henriette an indifferent though strictly courteous manner. I am not of my generation, for lack of the great American virtue of "getting on" never condemns a man in my eyes, provided he is neither mean nor lazy. So many charming persons I know never have "gotten on" and never will, and are so modest and sympathetic by virtue of their defects that I almost prefer them to the blatantly successful. Margaret says she does, too.

Maurice, with Henriette hovering near him, told us all he knew — a straight tale, in my estimation. What pleased me was his utter frankness about both his love and his quarrel with his uncle.

"I couldn't see just why Uncle Timothy should be so wrought up over the news," he said. "But I suppose he may have mistrusted my

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

power of taking care of Henriette. It puzzled me, and it made me angry, and we had high words. I was so resentful that I turned suddenly and left him at the stone pagoda."

"Did Mr. Wildfell say why he objected to your engagement?" Margaret asked.

"No; but he said he would never give his consent — that he had other plans for her."

Margaret and I exchanged glances. This seemed to fit into one of her theories, at least.

"I don't know what they could have been," Henriette said. "But I am sure Mr. Wildfell could not have borne to see me unhappy. He was always so kind to me."

We four were standing on the porch, and just at this moment we became aware of excited voices — of a little tumult in the grounds, which centred apparently about two strangers, a young man and woman of rustic appearance, evidently both distressed and embarrassed. In contrast to their demeanour that of the chief policeman and of Perrine, who accompanied them, was both serious and exultant. Something in their expression — that unmistakable look in the face of an official who has nailed a theory



## THIS WAY OUT

— filled me with a nameless apprehension. We four stood in absolute silence watching them approach.

They came to the foot of the steps, the girl, who was pretty and freckled, gazing at Margaret and Henriette; the young man awkward, but resolute. He looked directly at Maurice and at no one else.

“Have you ever seen this gentleman before?” the officer asked.

“Would you please turn around, sir — with your back to me?” the stranger said, addressing Maurice.

Maurice obeyed.

“Yes, sir. It seems the same back — and it’s the same suit, blue serge.”

“What is this? Who are these people?” Henriette demanded.

“Witnesses, miss, I’m sorry to say,” Perrine muttered.

“Witnesses!” I exclaimed.

The young farmer — he was evidently a farmer — now addressed me:

“My name’s Scott, sir. This lady’s Miss Mamie Duggan. We were out buggy riding yes-

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

terday, and happened to see something we didn't stop at the time to investigate because Miss Duggan was afraid. We were on the main road, just opposite an opening in the woods that led to a kind of a round spot, when we saw two men come into it, a young man and a man a bit older. They seemed to be quarreling, though we couldn't hear their voices. The young man picked up a stone all of a sudden, and hit the other, who fell down in a heap. Mamie screamed, and whether the young man heard her or not I don't know, but he ran into the wood — then back again, and knelt down by the body; and suddenly the man who was hurt moved and raised himself a little, and Mamie cried, 'Drive on, Jim, he ain't dead! Oh, drive on, I'm afraid!' So I drove on, like an idiot, though kind o' longin' to get out and see what the scrap was about. This mornin' I read of Mr. Wildfell's murder, and the spot described was where we saw — what we saw."

"And you are positive this is the young man?"

"Not positive, officer, but I'd swear in any court of law he looks like him. He was fair, slim, had on a dark-blue suit."

## THIS WAY OUT

Henriette gave a little tortured cry, and looked at Maurice, who suddenly put his hands before his face.

"But Mr. Wildfell — did you know him?" Margaret cried.

"I never saw Mr. Wildfell, ma'am, so I wouldn't have known him. It was all over so quick, and I hadn't as good a look at the man on the ground!"

"Take him into the drawing-room, officer," Mr. Perrine said, "and let him see —"

The officer nodded. Henriette was weeping now, and Miss Mamie Duggan, who had been watching her with an ever-growing understanding of the situation, suddenly ran up the steps and put her arms about her.

"Don't cry! I'm awful sorry. I'd 'a' kep' still, but Jim, he thought he ought to tell. I never would have let him if I'd known you was keepin' company."

## III

With Maurice Wildfell formally charged with murder, Margaret still protested her belief in his innocence. The trial was set for December, and

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

during those weary months Margaret had Henriette with her. She did everything in her power for the girl; and she and I never let the case out of our sight for a moment. I think we made half a dozen trips to Wildfell Hall to question servants, to go all over the old ground again. The hour at which the murder had been witnessed by Jim Scott and his "girl" and the probable hour of Wildfell's death were abominably synchronous. As far as circumstantial evidence can be final this was. Yet we sought frantically for loopholes.

Margaret took Henriette motoring a good deal to divert her mind and to keep her in the fresh air. I was often with them on these expeditions.

One proved memorable. We were out in New Jersey one day in October, when an accident occurred to the car which we found would detain us for a couple of hours in the little village of Brentwood. We killed time for a while by wandering around the meagre streets, and then Margaret proposed that we should go in for a few minutes to the moving pictures, for the town boasted a "movie" theatre.

I've never liked them much, because they hurt

## THIS WAY OUT

my eyes; and I think them the greatest dullers of the imagination ever invented; so I sat as patiently as I could, thankful at least to be with Margaret.

Suddenly she uttered a cry, and laid a hand on my arm. I looked up. The usual melodrama was zipping along, and they had gotten to the murder. But what was on the film? By all that is astonishing, the circular opening in the woods of Wildfell Hall, the dwarfed trees, the distant towers of the Hall, the stony ground; and a young man killing an older one. The body dropped. The young man ran into the woods, ran back again, knelt by the body. The assaulted man stirred, raised himself. The film jumped into blackness — out of blackness into another scene, with the same background. The supposedly murdered man was on his feet now, the young man on his knees, the living image of Maurice.

Some one gave a cry — I think it was Henriette. Then voices from various parts of the house called, "Sit down!" "Sit down!" and Margaret and I realised that we had both risen, and were staring at each other with blanched

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

faces. Between us was a white, huddled form. Henriette had fainted.

### IV

At the office of the motion-picture company, in New York, they informed us that the author of "Caught In His Own Net," and also the chief actor in it was Gordon Spaith — a name once associated with the legitimate drama. Margaret explaining what urgent reasons we had for obtaining his address, they gave it to us.

We telephoned first, to be sure of finding him in that evening, and sharp at the hour set we were in the hall of an uptown apartment house.

Gordon Spaith himself admitted us, and I noted at once his resemblance to the assaulted man on the film. Margaret began by telling him the object of our visit — and asking him where the murder scene from "Caught In His Own Net" had been rehearsed.

He looked puzzled.

"In the Brinton studios," he said.

"But the scenery, the background — wasn't that taken from a special locality?"

## THIS WAY OUT

"Why, yes; it's a spot on the Palisades."

"But the moving picture — wasn't it taken there?"

"Oh, no — but a friend of mine had taken a very charming photograph of that particular place, and it was enlarged and used as a background for that scene."

"Which was not actually rehearsed there — photographed there?"

"Oh, no; that would not have been possible — there was no apparatus that day."

"What day? —" Margaret interrupted eagerly.

"A day last June —"

"Haven't you dates? Didn't you know of the Wildfell murder — on that very spot — the circular opening?"

Mr. Spaith sat up in his chair.

"I knew that Timothy Wildfell had been murdered somewhere on his estate — but I didn't get the details at the time, for we had been lost to the world for two weeks after that event, camping in the Palisade wilderness. We saw no papers, heard only the meagre details when we returned to New York that you get when an affair has died down."

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

"Oh, it hasn't died down!" Margaret cried. "We think an innocent man is imprisoned for that murder. We are trying to clear it up."

"And you say that the body was found in the middle of that circular opening? I never dreamed that was on the Wildfell estate. We *were* trespassers, then!"

"Whom do you mean when you say 'we'?"

"Myself and my young friends, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Benson. We had started out on a walking trip up the Palisade wilderness—and as we went we conceived the idea of weaving a story for the movies—a kind of scenario suggested by the scenery and the events of each day. We got our plot, and by and by it took such hold on us that we'd act out little scenes in it for our amusement—taking turns being audience. Both Benson and I have a theory that pantomime is a very subtle art, because gesture has to take the place of the voice. So we used to practise what we called vocal gestures, each one seeing how expressive he could make a mere motion—and there was quite a rivalry between us."

"And you rehearsed a murder scene?"



## THIS WAY OUT

Spaith smiled as if the question evoked a humorous memory.

"Oh, that murder!" he said. "I think we nearly frightened a rural couple out of their wits. Betty — Mrs. Benson — had sat down to rest in a very pretty circular opening we found in the woods, and which she photographed, and we did the murder scene for her amusement — there were so many convenient stones! A path led from the opening to the main road, and I was well in the midst of the scene before I noticed that two people in a buggy were staring at us as if transfixed. Then suddenly the man whipped up his horse. He must have thought us lunatics — or real criminals." He paused and looked intently at Margaret.

"Why, madam — you are —"

"Yes, weeping," she said, and smiled through her tears, "but with relief. Tell me, is Mr. Benson fair and slender?"

"That sufficiently describes him."

"Did he have on a blue serge suit?"

"Yes — he did."

"Was the day the tenth of June?"

"Let me think — when did we start? — Thurs-

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

day, Friday. It was Saturday we did the murder scene — the second Saturday in June."

"And June came in on Thursday this year," I said, "so the second Saturday must have been the tenth."

Margaret drew a photograph from her bag.

"Does Mr. Benson resemble this young man?"

Mr. Spaith looked earnestly at it.

"Yes, there's a strong general resemblance."

"You don't remember just the hour in the afternoon you had the mock murder?"

"Between four and five."

Margaret and I looked at each other.

"That coincides," I said.

"We left rather hastily, because some one approached the opening who seemed rather surprised at our being there. We had cut through the grounds of an estate, but we thought we were well off of them until this man appeared who seemed to regard us as trespassers."

"Did he speak to you?"

"No, but he frowned. He seemed in a state of agitation."

"Tall — dark?"

"Yes."

## THIS WAY OUT

"Middle-aged?"

"Yes — with a high Roman nose."

"Oh, tell me," Margaret cried, "was he alone?"

"Absolutely alone."

"Maurice is cleared!" she exclaimed.

She then gave all the details. Mr. Spaith was a most astonished man, to hear that his mock murder had been the evidence upon which Maurice had been arrested.

"If we only had seen the papers the next day or two," Spaith exclaimed, "we could have soon cleared up the mystery of what the couple in the buggy saw. As it was, we were buried from the world for nearly two weeks — and had no idea, therefore, that there was any connection between the Wildfell mystery and our harmless antics. We worked up our scenario, sold it, and then Benson and I did the murder scene and a number of others for the movies. They used for a background to that scene the circular opening, with the towers of a stately country house in the distance that Mrs. Benson had photographed, because the villain was supposed to be a deadly

## THE MYSTERY OF WILDFELL HALL

millionaire. Well! well! This will advertise 'Caught In His Own Net.' ”

“ It deserves to be advertised,” Margaret said, with a happy sigh of relief. “ It will remove a charge of murder from an unfortunate young man — and give him back to a girl who loves him dearly.”

Gordon Spaith leaned over confidentially, his eyes shining.

“ May I use the incident in a new plot I am working up? ” he said. “ I'll make it end in a wedding.”

“ Of course, it ends in a wedding! ” Margaret answered — and for a moment her eyes met mine.



**VI**

**THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA**



## VI

### THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

**T**HIS is one of Margaret's experiences in which I had no part. I give it here as she related it to me.

It was evening when I reached the Convent of St. Lucia, to which, though I am a Protestant, I had been sent by my Doctor because of the excellent care convalescents received from the Sisters. They did not belong to a nursing order, but their convent was situated high in the mountains and the bracing air drew people who needed building up.

The last stage of my journey had been made over a road so rough that only the glorious views it revealed rendered it endurable. These were of stupendous shadows, of rich lakes of light fringed with pine-trees of so deep a green as to be almost black, of distant peaks of transparent



## THIS WAY OUT

blue—a world of intense radiance with clefts and passes in mysterious twilight.

Although I was still weak from my long illness, these unbounded aspects produced in me an unusual exhilaration. I felt like laughing and singing; I experienced the revival of old ambitions, one of the first signs of returning health. People speak of forebodings as if they invariably preceded great or critical events. On the eve of one of the strangest adventures of my life, not a shadow of prescience crossed my mind.

Suddenly a turn of the tortuous, stony road revealed the convent high above us on a sharp spur of the mountains, that cut into the light, like the last outpost of the solid earth. I observed that the walls on one side formed the continuation of a precipice, of a height, I estimated roughly, of about three hundred feet. The stone of which the convent was built so much resembled the face of the cliff that but for the narrow windows piercing the super-structure it might have been mistaken for an elongation of the mountain itself.

A machicolated parapet outlined the flat roof

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

of the building, and held my attention by the perilous position of two figures who stood close to the dizzy edge apparently admiring the view. So far as I could tell they were visitors, not nuns, for I caught the gleam of a scarlet robe, and of what seemed the yellow flowers of a head-dress or a hat. Suddenly one of the figures leaned far over the parapet. I gave a cry and caught my driver's arm.

"She'll fall," I cried; then I grew quite faint, in a dreadful helpless inability even to scream, for the terrible thing happened before my eyes. The woman who had leaned over so far suddenly spread out her arms and like a shot bird fell through the air down the appalling depth of the precipice.

When I came to my senses I was lying in a high whitewashed hall on a couch, and bending over me was a nun whose sweet face was full of solicitude.

"Are you better, Madame?" she asked. "The mountain air sometimes induces fainting spells, especially after an illness."

I gazed at her a moment, scarcely realising where I was, or how I had come there. Then as

## THIS WAY OUT

if by a lightning flash, the horrible scene I had witnessed returned to me. "It was not the effect of the air," I gasped. "I saw her fall."

The Sister looked at me as if my mind were wandering. She was joined at that moment by another nun to whom she whispered. I caught the words, "Yes, the driver said—" Then the rest escaped me. I saw that they did not realise that a dreadful accident had happened, and, commanding all my strength, I got up from the couch and held out imploring hands to them. "You must go quickly. She may be alive. She fell from the roof over the precipice."

The two Sisters glanced at each other. Their astonishment I could see was unfeigned, and to send them running I described exactly what I had seen; but Sister Theresa, as I afterwards learned was her name, put a quieting hand on my arm.

"We have no such people with us, Mrs. Carpenter," she said gently. "Our only convalescents are an old lady, and a young girl who is recovering from typhoid. Both are confined to their beds."

"But at least send some one to the foot of the

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

precipice," I urged. "A stranger may have wandered in to see your view."

"That is not possible," said the other Sister; "the porter has admitted no one but yourself to-day. You are suffering from a slight relapse due to the tiresome journey, and perhaps to the rarity of the air. We shall put you to bed at once."

I was too shaken, and too weak to resist her gentle authority, and I followed her down what seemed endless bare corridors with narrow grated windows through which I dared not glance. I hoped that my room would not be on the side of the precipice. I was relieved when the nuns led me into an apartment that faced upon a sunny garden, and left me to myself.

For some moments I lay quite still upon my bed listening to the drowsy murmur of bees amidst the flower beds of heliotrope. I am nearly always depressed upon my first coming to a strange place — my body arrives hours and perhaps days before my soul; but something more significant than nervous depression now weighed me down. I felt imprisoned in the indifference of others; like a person who must

## THIS WAY OUT

make known a mortal need in a strange tongue.

I looked about my room. An almost hieratic purity and simplicity prevailed. A crucifix of an ancient, appealing type hung on the otherwise bare walls. Upon my dressing table was a jug of flowers. Under ordinary circumstances this quiet, unlittered place would have been as balm to me — but to-day after what I had witnessed it was like a nursery song as a sequel to a stabbing.

I knew I had not been mistaken. I had witnessed a horrid tragedy; and that they did not or could not believe me, only added to the sinister effect.

Unable to rest I rose after a while and went to my toilet stand to bathe my face. While I was doing this, what was my astonishment to see walking about the garden a woman in a red or scarlet dress — a woman of about thirty with dark hair. I could not identify her face, but I instantly recognised the peculiar colour of her gown, identical with that flash of scarlet on the parapet.

And here she was complacently picking flowers after an appalling experience — the experi-

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

ence of seeing a companion hurled to death. I felt that I must challenge her. I opened one of the sashes of my French window, and said:

“Pardon, Madame. May I speak with you?”

She looked up; she regarded me a moment thoughtfully, then in a melodious voice she answered me: “It is against the rules for patients to converse during the rest hour,” and, turning from me, she disappeared in the shadows of the little cloister that surrounded the garden.

That was all, but the cool reminder had the effect of a dash of water in the face of a sleeper. “Very well!” I thought, “if no one in this Convent believes me, I shall see for myself.”

I had at least proved that there was a woman in a scarlet gown within the walls of the Convent of St. Lucia. Who was she? Why did they deny her presence?

Opening my door I looked out into the corridor. It was very still. In the sweet mountain air that washed through it was a faint odor of incense. I had no idea which way to proceed, so I walked to the right and followed the corridor for some distance before it turned, and wid-

## THIS WAY OUT

ened into a kind of hall at one side of which was a steep staircase.

Descending the stairs was a priest, the pastor, as I learned afterwards, of a mountain parish in the vicinity of the convent. He had a young, pure face, and a sensitive, steadfast mouth that at once awakened my confidence. He bowed to me silently and was about to pass me, when I said: "Father, I must speak to you."

He paused; then, "What can I do for you?"

Without preliminaries I told him what had happened to me that afternoon. "I was not dreaming, or fainting, or delirious," I said with passionate earnestness. "I saw that dreadful fall. I saw the woman in scarlet in the garden."

He had grown very pale; and this extreme pallor made him look more than ever like the monk whom Giorgione in that dream of perished melody places at the harpsichord. He did not at once answer me; and when he spoke it was with clear directness as one person in health answers another. A great relief filled me when he said, "This must be looked into; I will go with you to the roof and you must show me as well as you can just where the two people were

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

standing. I have an errand for a moment in the chapel. Will you go with me?"

I followed him through other passages; and at last he led me through a door into a dim Gothic chapel, beautiful in design and feeling. At the east end through the shadows shone the whiteness of the altar and the red stain of a burning lamp. An odor of incense and bay and field lilies came delicately to my senses.

I knelt in one of the pews while Father Rathmore went into the sacristy. Like many Protestants I could come under the spell of this ancient Church; and to-day Her symbols quieted me.

He returned in a few moments, saying, "I am ready," and we retraced our way to the staircase where I had met him.

It was very steep and seemed to go up interminably. My knees began to shake, my heart to beat violently. My guide ordered me to stop after a glance at me, and we paused for a while in the gloom of the wall through which the staircase ran.

Instinctively I trusted this young priest who seemed so willing to investigate an apparently



## THIS WAY OUT

wild story; but I have observed in my passage through life that the most sincerely religious natures have usually the most logical, open and generous minds.

We toiled on and reached at last the flat roof of the convent surrounded as I had observed from below by a machicolated parapet. On one side this roof was scarcely fifty feet above the cloister-garden; on the other it over-hung the precipice.

Leaving me where I was Father Rathmore advanced towards the edge of the roof, and standing perilously near to the edge of the gulf, gazed down. Then he made a sign for me to join him. Seeing that I advanced timidly he said, "Do not be afraid. I'll not let you fall."

The calmness of his tone was in itself like a guarding wall. My fears vanished. I placed myself by his side.

"Now look down," he commanded me.

The precipice ended three hundred feet below me in a kind of natural terrace or plateau about one hundred feet broad; thickly covered with stones, and bare of any other object.

"You see there is nothing, Mrs. Carpenter — nothing but the stones."

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

"Then," I said, "what did happen to me!"

"You were tired; perhaps you had dozed off to sleep; or your eyes were dazzled by the sun."

But I shook my head doubtfully; and now he directed my attention to one of the most superb views I have ever beheld; peak upon peak soaring away into ethereal distances with many delicate gradations of blue and violet. From that exhilarating immensity my eyes returned to the foreground, then to the nearer, more companionable views on the opposite side of the Convent. To my surprise I saw the roof of what looked like a modern country house among the trees.

"You have neighbours!"

"Quite a summer colony — though you wouldn't suspect it — for most of the houses are not visible from the road up which you came."

"And who lives in that house?"

"Mr. Samuel Weston —" he hesitated, then said, "He is in deep mourning for a daughter who died just a year ago under tragic and mysterious circumstances. She was found, strangely enough, on that very plateau below us, with her head crushed; she had been wandering in the woods below the convent and met no doubt with

## THIS WAY OUT

foul play. The greatest excitement prevailed through the mountains, for we had always considered the region free of bad characters; but the perpetrator of the deed was never run down."

"How old was this daughter?" I asked.

"About twenty-three."

"Had Mr. Weston no other children?"

"No — but his niece lives with him. She will probably inherit his great fortune, as the family has all but died out."

"May I ask her name?"

"Claire Weston. She comes a good deal to the convent, though she is not a Catholic. She is a strange, clever woman, about thirty years of age, I should say."

"Tall, willowy, with very black hair — and swarthy skin?"

He looked surprised. "You know her then!"

"No! — but —"

I was about to tell him that the woman I had seen in scarlet in the cloister garden was of that type, but I thought it best to keep silence. The priest perceiving my hesitation turned the subject, and soon afterwards we descended the stairs. As we were proceeding toward the cloi-

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

sters we met Sister Ursula, who seemed relieved to see me in the company of Father Rathmore. "I was anxious, Mrs. Carpenter, when passing your room I found it empty," she said.

"I am to blame," the priest said. "I took Mrs. Carpenter up to see the view."

Sister Ursula shrugged her shoulders. "O, that view! It has been responsible for serious set-backs. Semi-invalids have no business up those stairs, and you know it, Father."

He smiled deprecatingly under this scolding. At that moment two figures appeared — one a Sister whom I had not seen; the other — I realised with a shock — the swarthy, dark woman I had beheld picking flowers not an hour ago. To my astonishment, however, she wore not a scarlet but a white gown suitable to the summer afternoon.

This fact threw me for a moment into that strange state of nervous terror which seizes us when we are obliged to distrust the evidence of our senses. The white gown was a refutation of all I had experienced this afternoon. They were right after all. I had been dreaming, or the sun had dazzled my eyes. The terrible thing I had

## THIS WAY OUT

seen was but the creation of my weakened nerves.

For a moment I was in that unreasoning terror that is like a bath of death, a submerging darkness. Out of this I was drawn by the glance of the dark woman's eyes — a deep, still look of recognition that told me she had been indeed in the garden, and had answered me when I spoke from my window. That I had seen her in scarlet and not in white did not destroy the verity of the encounter.

"Mrs. Carpenter, this is Miss Claire Weston," said Sister Ursula, adding, "one of our neighbours."

I am a strong believer in that chemical attraction or repulsion between two spirits which sometimes acts upon the very instant of their first meeting. The soul knows its enemies as well as its friends. In the glance of Claire Weston's dark eyes I read at once a hostility that was too keen to be veiled. I felt myself in the presence of a secretive and unclarified spirit.

"I think I spoke to you when you were in the cloister-garden, Miss Weston," I said.

She smiled.

"I am afraid I seemed rude, but I like to aid

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

the Sisters in keeping their rules of health, if not of religion," she added, and put her hand with a playful gesture on Sister Ursula's shoulder.

I felt like crying out, "Don't touch that good woman; you are not worthy," but I checked an impulse that was probably but the effect of my over-strung state.

A distant bell came as a solemn check to my confused fancies.

"Do you feel well enough to attend Benediction?" Sister Ursula asked.

I was only too glad to enter the twilight of the chapel, and to yield my confusions to the peace that seemed to flow from the white altar. Miss Weston took a seat near me and slightly in advance of me, so I had ample opportunity to study her face — the thin lips, the close set eyes, the intense secretiveness of expression — as if a cover should so tightly set on as to proclaim something guarded.

Then music flowed over us, plaintive, divinely spiritual and alluring, and my feverish fancies ebbed away as on a great unknown tide. What was this Church that carried an old cry through

## THIS WAY OUT

the ages; and kept alive in people's minds the memory of wounds inflicted in remote Judea? The chanting of the nuns reached me not from that screened choir, but from old centuries, and the altar lighted depths of catacombs.

When the service was over Miss Weston approached me and held out her hand. "I hope you will come and see me when you are better," she said. I thanked her and accepted the invitation. I had my own reason for wishing to see more of her.

That night as I was preparing to go to bed a gentle knock at the door was the prelude to the appearance of the Mother Superior. She was a sturdy little old lady with a shrewd, kindly face, and eyes that regarded you through thick glasses with warm benignity. She patted my hand, examined my silver toilet articles with the frank interest of a very human mind; and then said briskly, "You're quite all right to-night, my child? no fancies? no lingering fever?"

"Not a trace. Let me open that stopper for you."

"I can't see a bottle of perfume without wanting to smell it," she said apologetically. "I

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

think the good God created delicate fragrances for our comfort."

She sniffed and smiled appreciatively. "That's—let me see—that's jasmine. I like the flower odours much better than those oriental mixtures."

"Such as Miss Weston uses," I added.

"Oh, so you've found that out! You've met Miss Weston then."

"This afternoon, just before Benediction. May I ask if she was here a year ago?"

"Why, yes—she was staying with her uncle when the dreadful thing happened to poor Agnes Weston. I don't know what he would have done without her. Oh, that was a terrible time!" she sighed.

"Were they very friendly, the two cousins?"

"Inseparable, though Claire was older than Agnes. She had a strong influence over her—almost an hypnotic influence, I thought, at times."

"Miss Weston has hypnotic eyes," I commented.

The Mother Superior crossed herself. "Science is trying to catch up with the Church



## THIS WAY OUT

these days," she said with a smile. "We used to call hypnotism witchcraft and demonology. Devout people still think that a strong, bad will might be termed the influence of the devil," she added with gentle irony; then recollecting herself, "Not that we wish to impute such things to poor Miss Weston."

"Oh, no!" I laughed.

But when I was alone I was inclined to think there was more in it than met the eye. I was inclined to believe "that a strong, bad will" emanated from the dark, silent woman whom I had seen first clothed in scarlet.

What had caused that hallucination? Had I pressed my hand across my eyeballs unknowingly and thus produced a red aura that for the instant enveloped the figure in the garden? And that frightful scene on the parapet — the woman in scarlet, the woman with the hat or head-dress of yellow, who had spread her arms to the void, and dropped like a shot bird? What was it! Would my brain play me such freaks in future? I prayed not.

My days after this passed quietly enough, for the most part in the shelter and sunshine of the

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

convent garden, where, in the bracing mountain air I rapidly regained my strength. I did not go up on the roof again, for I wished to avoid a possible recurrence of the emotions that had wrecked me on the day of my arrival. I spent my hours reading or knitting, talking with the Sisters or with Miss Weston who came occasionally to see me. I had never overcome my first instinctive antipathy towards her, but I sometimes forgot it, as I listened to her really brilliant talk. She had been everywhere, it seemed — in Russia, in India, in Egypt, yet she sometimes spoke of her travels with bitterness as they had been taken in the character of companion to a rich and disagreeable old lady.

“But surely you had compensation in seeing so much of the world.”

“I saw it as a prisoner,” she replied. “I want to see it again when I am free — rich and free.”

It would be impossible to describe the curious vibrant quality of her voice as she pronounced the words “rich and free,” indicative of a spirit sick with longing for a state too long delayed — as if life had been for her thus far a mystic cipher of deprivation.

## THIS WAY OUT

One day I left the precincts of the convent to accept her long-standing invitation to take tea with her. The rosy little portress detained me a moment to compliment me upon my improvement.

"Do you have many visitors these days?" I asked her.

"Not so many," she replied, "as when the grounds were without a warden; and the public could come and go at will; but they abused the privilege somewhat — and we had to withdraw it."

"How long since?"

"The new rule began this spring," she replied.

I went on my way musing upon the light this new piece of information threw across a subject that was never long absent from my mind.

My hostess received me in a long, low library whose windows commanded some of the views already familiar to me. It was a rich, dusky room suggestive of gilding and old leather; and in its shadowy corners were gleams of rare objects. Over the mantel, which was of a kind of peach-coloured marble, hung a glowing Rubens — a robust presentation of radiant flesh.

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

Miss Claire, again in white, presided over a service of old silver. Her long sallow fingers moved deftly among the cups and saucers.

"My uncle begs me to excuse him for not joining you, Mrs. Carpenter. This is one of his bad days."

"He is ill?"

She sighed and cast down her eyes. "He seems to be slowly wasting away. This afternoon his man is pushing him about the garden in a wheel chair. Ah, there he is!"

With a slow, graceful wave of her hand she indicated a forlorn white figure in the distance that seemed to be wilting rather than basking in the clear mountain sunshine. Behind his wheel chair was a man who pushed it like an automaton with the discouraging acquiescence of a hired, indifferent menial.

"When they go in I'll show you the garden," Miss Weston said. "Uncle will disappear before long."

I don't know why these simple words sent a cold chill over my flesh. I felt as if I must run from her — out of this house, into the wholesome air. Something oppressive haunted this

## THIS WAY OUT

place; as if its very beauty were tainted. An odd drowsiness took possession of me, less physical, than mental, and I wondered if I was about to have a recurrence of the sensations that had filled with horror the hours of my arrival at the convent. But I directed all the strength of my will against this invisible lurking element of darkness, and gradually my brain cleared.

While this was transpiring I continued my conversation with Miss Weston, and heard myself talking to her, and heard her answers as if I had been a third person in the room. But gradually I lost this sensation of duality, the curious weight was lifted from me to be replaced by a kind of sinister exaltation. It was as if I said to Miss Weston, "You can have no secrets from me. There's something walking about this house that's unaccounted for."

All this time we were talking of the French painter Carrière and of his cloud-enveloped work; and then we passed on to some novel or other. Miss Weston rose to get the book. As she did so I thought I saw a figure standing in one of the doorways—the figure of a young woman with very light hair, and a face of ex-

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

treme pallor. My heart began to beat violently, but when I looked again nothing was there.

"What is the matter, Mrs. Carpenter?" asked in an alarmed tone my hostess who had returned with the book.

"Just a passing faintness," I said. "I suppose I am not quite well yet!"

She laid the book in my lap, and I turned the pages indifferently. As conversation languished she proposed to show me the house, and I followed her through a series of beautiful rooms in every one of which I observed bowls of yellow roses and of no other flower — yellow roses with a rich copper-pink heart.

"You must have many of these in the garden," I remarked.

"They were my cousin's favourite flower," she commented. "She was very fond of yellow."

"And so I suppose wore it a good deal."

She darted a curious glance at me, and I thought that her eyes had the dull leaden look of a serpent's, but she replied simply, "Yes, she did wear yellow a good deal."

We proceeded to the next story, that she might show me some views she specially admired. She

## THIS WAY OUT

passed several closed doors, and, pausing before an opened one, motioned me to precede her. I was about to step over the threshold when I saw seated at a desk the same figure I had beheld in the doorway, and I drew back instantly. "But we are intruding!"

My exclamation produced a strange effect upon Miss Weston. The sallowness of her skin changed to an extreme pallor. "What do you mean?" she cried, and it seemed to me there was a note of terror in her voice.

"I beg your pardon," I said. "I thought I saw some one in the room."

A shiver passed through her frame. "No one occupies this room," she said firmly. "It was — Agnes's. I want to show you the view from those windows."

The room was a symphony in yellow of the tint that has a suggestion of rose in it. Even the toilet articles were of yellow Dresden sprinkled with tiny pink roses. All the decorations were of a delicacy and lightness that suggested the very essence of girlhood; but the place was as mournful as if the walls had been draped with black.

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

After I had admired the view I was conducted into the garden — a superb triumph of Nature assisted by Art.

Blazing blues rivalled the sky. Masses of roses revealed every mood of the rose! Here I was happy. We wandered on and on, Miss Weston pausing at times to cut me beautiful sprays of the choicest flowers. I thought myself delivered from the lurking horror of the house until an incident occurred that sent me violently back into certain abhorrent calculations.

The garden ended in a group of thatched cottages belonging to the gardeners. At the door of one of these cottages stood a girl in a dress of that peculiar shade of scarlet which was associated in my mind with moments of extreme mental suffering.

The girl was real enough, for Miss Weston spoke to her and she replied cheerily. But did my eyes again deceive me as to the true colour of the gown she wore? Determined to test my impression I said lightly: "What a glorious shade of scarlet!"

Miss Weston smiled. "That's one of my last summer's dresses. When I went into mourning



## THIS WAY OUT

for Agnes I gave it to Jean Henley who usually falls heir to my things because she is dark — and wears the same sizes that I do.”

“It’s a lovely colour.”

“I shall never wear it again,” she said with a sigh. “I had it on the day poor Agnes was brought home dead — and I — I’ve hated it ever since.”

Again that strange exultation of my spirit — as if I had in my power this woman whose swarthy face was just now touched with real sadness. Yet was I not dealing with fantasies, with the impalpable products of tired nerves? Could evil be handled, labelled, weighed, that was less than a smoke in the room, an oppressive odour in the atmosphere? “Uncle will soon disappear!” the words chimed on my mind like a dirge.

I returned to the convent with my arms full of flowers and my heart of foreboding. As I walked along the road, I saw lying among the weeds, a brown pocketbook held together by a rubber band. Investigating it and finding that it contained letters but no money, I put it in the bag I carried, and continued on my way. Just

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

outside the convent I met Father Rathmore. His boyish face, sensitive mouth, and eyes at once shrewd and dreaming, filled me with a desire to test the spiritual sensitiveness that seemed written on his features. After some preliminary talk on the beauty of the mountains, I said to him:

"Among your powers as a priest of the Catholic Church is that of exorcist, is it not so?"

He gazed at me a moment, then a smile lit up his face.

"If a priest of God's church cannot cast out evil spirits, who can?" he replied. "But you are a Protestant, Mrs. Carpenter; and, therefore, I should think too scientific to acknowledge the powers of darkness."

The delicate irony I received meekly, because of his blameless look as he uttered the words. I replied, "You are forced to acknowledge what you have experienced."

His shrewd sidewise glance appraised my sincerity.

"Tired nerves sometimes play impish tricks," he said calmly.

"I admit my nerves are tired. But suppose

## THIS WAY OUT

outward facts fitted in with the inner hauntings — the dark inner hauntings.”

“Then you should test these facts to the uttermost,” he replied gravely. “Have you stumbled upon evil in our mountains?”

“You remember what I told you on the afternoon of my arrival.”

“Most certainly.”

“Do you believe that an event might project its memory, so to speak, so powerfully that it could be re-enacted and be visible to a person in a highly sensitive state?”

He pondered over this.

“It is the theory,” he said at length, “that underlies the haunting of houses; and the appearance of apparitions on the theatre of old crimes. But it is a dangerous subject, one best left to experts in psychical research.”

When I left him, and sought admission at the convent gate, Sister Gudule, the little portress, exclaimed over my flowers.

“I’ll give some to the invalids, some to the altar,” I commented.

“There’s a poor lad just brought in,” she said. “He was found on the road, quite exhausted and

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

delirious. We've put him in the gardener's house. Sister Theresa is there now in charge. The doctor thinks the young man is in for brain fever."

I thought of the pocketbook of letters, and wondered if this stranger had dropped them; but I said nothing. I meant to examine them enough at least to get some hint of their ownership. My mind, too, was busy with another subject.

"You were here last year at this time, Sister Gudule?"

"I have been here ten years!"

"Do you remember the date upon which Miss Weston met her death?"

"I do, indeed! it was the twenty-third of July!"

The twenty-third of July—the date of my arrival a year later.

"Do you happen to remember whether Miss Claire Weston and her cousin visited the convent that day?"

Sister Gudule shook her head. "We had no portress lodge then. People came in and out quite freely. Miss Claire came often. She

## THIS WAY OUT

loved the view from our roof. She would sit there hours on end."

That night alone in my room I reviewed my facts—On July the twenty-third, within a few minutes of my arrival, I had witnessed what looked like a suicide and was perhaps a murder; had been obliged later to doubt the evidence of my senses, and to conclude that what I had seen was an hallucination. Then came the story of a tragedy—of a girl's mysterious death. Were these facts connected?

I opened the pocketbook, and took out a bundle of letters. They were not only without envelopes, but most of them were undated, except with the days of the week. They began "Dear," or "My own dear"—or "Dear beloved"; sometimes "My beloved husband." They were signed "Agnes"; except in two or three instances, when instead was written, "Your Wife," or "Your Own Wife."

My imagination went leaping ahead of my facts. These letters must have been written by Agnes Weston—no girl, no child, indeed, but the wife of some one from whom she had been separated. The handwriting was that of a lady.

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

For a long time I looked at these letters, and wondered if I had the right to read them, or should I restore them to the girl's family? That course seemed fraught with danger. Suppose they did not know of her marriage. It was likely that they did not—at least it seemed probable that the dying father knew nothing. And Miss Weston? Ah! she should not see these letters of love.

Was she ever mentioned in them? I began to read them, my cheeks burning as if I had listened at a door. The more I read the deeper was my astonishment—I gleaned that there had been a summer on a farm by the sea; a meeting with a farmer's son, love, fear of parental interference, fear of a cousin—"I sometimes passionately love, and sometimes passionately hate," much of this cousin—"a strange woman who must not know of our marriage." They had married then, these two, during that summer by the sea. Again much of Claire, "who suspects something. Her eyes follow me. This morning her hand was laid on the chain I wore. She wanted to pull it out—but I shrank back. She has such strange eyes. Sometimes when

## THIS WAY OUT

she looks at me I feel numb and passive, as if I must do whatever she wills."

Later letters — I had to judge from sequence of news rather than date — were full of her solicitude for her father. She was afraid to tell him of the marriage, but matters could not go on much longer without a revelation. She must turn somewhere for help if only for the sake of the child that was coming. Then a sudden turn of the road and great relief. "I have told Claire. She held me in her arms half the night. She wants me to be untrue to you, dearest; after the birth of my child she wishes me to desert you — and to hide our child away somewhere. The thought is agony; she puts before me my Father's anger. He is very proud. Even these mountains cannot bow down his spirit — yet you told me once that the sea had made you pray."

More of Claire — "I do not understand her! Sometimes she frightens me. Even a kiss from her seems like a threat. I think she wants to crowd you out of my heart — as if God Himself could do that! But since her brief meeting with you she seems to hate you. Don't reproach me

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

for my cowardice, and, oh, I beg you, not to come to my home. My Father can say things sometimes that cut like knives. I couldn't see you wounded! I could not!" Again — "Claire has arranged everything. She told my Father that I needed a change. Where she is taking me I don't know. How can I shrink from her when she is so good — so faithful. Yet I do shrink from her.

"I dreamed last night that a great green serpent came out of a wood and wound itself first about my feet; then around my knees, and at last it held me in its terrible grip and its flat head was close to my face; it had Claire's eyes. I woke myself screaming, and she came and laid down beside me; but when she tried to draw me into her arms I shrank away. The dream was too near."

Then apparently a long gap — a time of darkness and waiting overcast and burdened by the consciousness of deception. There had been meetings it seemed between the young husband and wife arranged for "in spite of Claire"; and at these meetings I gathered that he had urged Agnes to confess to her father all that happened;



## THIS WAY OUT

but that under the influence of some terror, or perhaps through fear of Claire, she remained in her state of miserable secrecy.

Then a letter of sharpest anguish. The child, a boy, had been born, and she had only seen him once — only once! Claire had him taken away; had promised to reveal where when the mother's strength was regained. Little feverish notes bridged the next gap — voicing intense longing for the baby she had only seen once. Apparently the young husband had protested, had announced his intention of facing Claire and forcing her to give up the secret, for in one letter Agnes implores him to do nothing as yet; in her weakened state such insistence on his part might be fatal to her.

Home again, but so ill in mind and so weak in body that her father is thoroughly alarmed. "Claire manages everything — stands between me and his questions."

A state of fatigue at last in which conflict is mentally impossible. "You must let me drift until I am stronger. I cannot even think of love or duty. I am so tired. I cannot even think

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

of my baby. I am too weak to endure such thoughts."

After this a strange passivity — a yielding to Claire's direction in all things, "even when she makes me climb those terrible stairs in the convent — because of the air and sun at the top. I dread that roof. There's a precipice on one side, and the very thought of it makes me ill and dizzy."

The letters continue calm, almost indifferent. Claire is training her to make extraordinary efforts. "She wants me to approach the edge of the convent roof — just as an exercise in will-power. The parapet is low. I dread the day when I must make the effort."

One more letter written as a sleeper might write from a heavy, weary dream. It ended, "We may go to the convent roof this afternoon. Perhaps I shall be strong enough for her test."

That was all! For a long time I sat in horrified quiet — knowing that I held in my hands nothing less than a record of murder — of a diabolical plot all the more vicious because carried out wholly by the engines of the mind and

## THIS WAY OUT

will; a plot still exercising its malign influence to sap the foundations of another life. Grief for his daughter had probably prepared Mr. Weston's mind for the destructive thought that I did not doubt Claire Weston daily sowed in it.

What should I do? Was the patient in the gardener's house Agnes Weston's husband? Had he come to demand of Claire Weston the information concerning his child which she alone held? In whom could I confide with safety?

To go to the Sisters or to the Mother Superior did not occur to me, but I thought of Father Rathmore with a sense of comfort and security. He possessed that rather rare endowment of spirituality and common sense; and I felt that I could trust him.

For several days I mingled with the nuns in their rare moments of leisure, hoping to glean some news of the patient in the gardener's house; but all I could learn was that he continued very ill.

One afternoon, while strolling in the outer garden I met Sister Gudule, and I inquired as to the health of the stranger. The poor boy had been better, she said. He had asked for his

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

clothes, but after examining them had suffered a kind of relapse and was again delirious — was ill — oh, terribly ill, and talking strangely.

The next day I sent for Father Rathmore. He came to me in the library of the convent. “Do you remember,” I said to him, “the day I asked you if you were an exorcist?”

He signified his remembrance of that occasion.

“I wish you to exercise that authority. These are the facts.”

He listened with unfeigned astonishment. I concluded my story by placing the letters in his hand. He retired to read them, promising to see me again that day.

Immediately after Benediction I was summoned to his presence. I found him pacing up and down the library in ill-concealed agitation.

“You have read the letters?”

“Yes! the poor child!”

“Is your patient in the gardener’s house Agnes Weston’s husband?”

He hesitated a moment, then he said, “I have every reason to believe so, if one may judge from the utterances of delirium.”

“What shall we do, Father?”

## THIS WAY OUT

He did not answer me at once; then he said slowly as if presenting the terms of a problem.

"She could never be brought to justice. The Law makes no provisions for the terrible agencies of the will. It must deal with facts. There is nothing to prove that Claire Weston ascended to the roof of the convent with her cousin, and there impelled her to an action which was sure to end fatally — nothing, indeed, but the vision of a lady not long over fever herself. The body of Agnes was found, to be sure, at the foot of the precipice, but there was nothing to prove that she had fallen from the roof of the convent."

"As a priest," I said, "you can take private action."

"I mean to take private action," he replied firmly. "My exorcism will consist in compelling Miss Weston to reveal the whereabouts of Agnes's child; and to leave her uncle's house. I cannot say that I wholly understand her case, but I have proof enough that evil magnetism dwells in her. To live with such a woman might well sap the vitality of a man already consumed with grief."

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

"He must be told of Agnes's son."

"Certainly. It might link him to life again."

A fortnight later on a dark day full of wind and scudding cloud, I left the convent gates in company with Father Rathmore and Richard Antony. The young man in the course of some conversations which I had had with him, revealed a spirit naturally sensitive and truth-loving. I gathered that Agnes Weston's compromises, which had ended as do most compromises in destructive conditions, had been irksome to him from the first. His love had demanded sincerity and frankness; he had not shared her fear of her father's anger. "We had the right feeling," he said simply; "if she had followed it we might have been happy now."

The beautiful gardens were deserted as we passed through them. Young Antony gazed about them with a strained, wistful look, as if he half-expected to catch the gleam of yellow hair within the labyrinthine avenues of yellow roses. My hour for seeing visions was over. I was on the plain track of accomplishment.

We were shown into the dim, glowing library

## THIS WAY OUT

through whose gloom the faces of the bereaved boy and of the priest showed palely. The priest seemed preparing himself for some inner rite, vesting his soul, selecting from the treasury of his church the needed instruments of holy decision.

She entered at last, viewed us an instant, then as she recognised Antony her face grew grey and small, her eyes dark points of baleful interrogation. She came forward and greeted the priest and myself, then waited as if for an introduction to the stranger with us. Father Rathmore laid his hand on Antony's shoulder.

"The husband of your late cousin, Miss Weston, has come to obtain from you some information to which he has a right."

Her greyish pallor deepened. She drew in her lips and bit them until they were gleaming white lines in the mask of her face.

"There is some mistake," she said in a voice of ice. "My cousin was never married."

The priest took a step forward, the light of righteous menace in his clear-cut face. "Take care how you blacken the memory of your cousin, Miss Weston. You are required to give me at

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

once the name of the people or of the institution with whom your cousin's child is placed. Mr. Antony has with him the certificate of his marriage, also many of your cousin's letters to him. You cannot deny that you allowed him to believe, while he was absent in the West hunting employment, that his wife still lived. Will you now summon your uncle, or shall I request one of the servants to bring him?"

The two faced each other a moment in profound silence, matching wills — opposing two magics. The priest's energy of righteous will made his face look every moment younger — that strange youth of those who are much with God; but Claire Weston grew old before our eyes; sickened into the incurable senility of evil-doing. "My uncle is not in any condition to hear this news," she said at last, "it might kill him."

"You consider truth more poisonous than a lie; I do not. You will summon your uncle. You will be in attendance while I relate this story. Before you leave the room, however, I request you to write down the address at which your cousin's child may be found."

He pointed to a writing desk. With a glance



## THIS WAY OUT

at him of helpless but furious resentment, she seated herself, and wrote something on a sheet of paper which she handed to him. Then she started to leave the room.

"One moment, please," Father Rathmore said, reaching for the telephone. He asked for long distance. "I must verify this," he explained.

The silence was intense while we waited. It was as if the evil magnetism with which this house seemed charged, had concentrated itself in a heavy cloud about us. The bell rang sharply at last. The priest asked a few direct questions, then hung up the receiver.

"I am glad you told me the truth," he said simply. "Please fetch Mr. Weston."

She was shivering as if with a violent chill; but there was colour in her cheeks, imparting to her a wild, sudden beauty, like a crimson rift in a black sunset. She bowed to us all, and left the room.

We waited — not looking at each other, not speaking. The room seemed covered with an ever-deepening twilight through which shone yellow things; the roses were everywhere as usual, and their scent was like the memory of girlhood.

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

Richard Antony fingered a delicate bud that hung near him, drooped his white face towards it a moment.

Father Rathmore paced up and down, quiet and recollected. Sometimes he glanced through the windows at the yellow foam of flowers in the garden; once he drew a little book from his pocket, read a few pages, sighed profoundly. He seemed to me to possess that sense of the mystery of life which is not invariably an adjunct of the priesthood.

We waited. The flying clouds cast dark shadows on the garden of roses whose hues seemed dissolving in semi-twilight. The wind called in the chimney. The moments passed, but no one returned to us.

Father Rathmore and I glanced at each other.

"I think I will go back to the convent," I said.

"You can summon me if it is necessary."

"Very well. I will ring soon if she does not come."

There was no one in the great hall as I passed through it. I crossed the terrace and the garden. The mountains were black against a wild grey sky. Flying yellow petals tapped my cheek

## THIS WAY OUT

as lightly as a girl's kiss. Then the long wind bore them off and away.

Sister Gudule remarked as I entered the convent grounds that I was pale. "Yet I have not been far," I said; "only to the Westons."

She looked amazed. "But I admitted Miss Claire half an hour ago."

"She was not expecting guests," I commented. "Is she still in the convent?"

"She said she was going up on the roof," replied Sister Gudule.

I waited in the grounds, that in case Father Rathmore sent for me I should be within call. The time dragged. I paced up and down between the garden beds, glad that they held no yellow roses.

Suddenly I saw the Mother Superior coming towards me with an odd tottering walk, her face as white as her fluted cap. "Oh, Mrs. Carpenter," she cried, "something terrible has happened!"

Three years later I went again to St. Lucia's Convent to spend a part of the summer season. As I drove up the familiar winding road my eyes

## THE CONVENT OF ST. LUCIA

were raised fearfully to that parapet on which my vision had beheld singular enactments. I saw that it was now protected by a high iron grating. The driver pointed his whip to it. "They've fixed it up," he said, "since the lady committed suicide."

"I was here at the time," I commented.

At the gate of the convent Father Rathmore met me and greeted me with cordiality. He asked me if I should like to see the sequel of a dark and unhappy tale. Leaving my baggage to be carried in, I went with him up the road that led from the convent to the Westons. A turn in it brought us at last in full view of the great garden, now in all the glory of its summer flowering. The yellow roses were abundant. Walking among them with a sure strong step was a man whom I recognised as Mr. Weston. By his hand he held a little boy whose golden hair gleamed and shone in the afternoon sunlight.

"His adored grandson," said Father Rathmore with a smile.



**CHAPTER VII**  
**THE LOST WATTEAU**



## CHAPTER VII

### THE LOST WATTEAU

**I** MADE Leonard Bright's acquaintance after I had become engaged to Mrs. Carpenter, who was an old friend of the Bright family — Philadelphians, living "on the Main Line." Leonard, the present head, despite his Quaker ancestry, was imbued with a deep love of the arts; and was himself, in a quiet way, a connoisseur. He limited his collection to the French school of the Eighteenth Century, though no one would have suspected him of predilections for the autumn gallantries of Watteau, or the dainty frivolities of Lancret. As a man who viewed life through his conscience rather than his emotions, he seemed sometimes like a shy interloper in his own gallery.

I once asked him if he had a favourite among his pictures. He led me to a small Watteau whose inches of canvas preserved the mellow



## THIS WAY OUT

magic of old autumns and old loves. "A pretty scene!" he commented. "What are those people talking about?"

"Love and the latest fashions," I said; but he shook his head as if in search of a deeper reason for their bland contentment.

Not long after this incident Margaret received from Bright a letter that contained serious news. His beloved Watteau had been stolen from the gallery on the last visitors' day.

Then followed some particulars. The curator declared that the painting was in its place when he opened the gallery at the accustomed hour, and admitted in all ten visitors of whom seven were strangers, and the other three personal friends of Bright's. When the curator closed the doors of the gallery shortly after five and went the rounds before switching off the lights, he was horrified to see a vacancy in the line of the pictures. The little golden-coloured Watteau was missing.

Bright asked Margaret's help in solving the mystery. His invitation that she should spend a few days with himself and his sister at Five Oaks was extended also to me.

## THE LOST WATTEAU

We arrived at lunch time, and during that meal no one referred to the theft of the Watteau, partly, I imagine, because the Brights did not wish the subject discussed in the presence of the servants. We talked of the Futurists instead and of their symbolisms; and I remember little Miss Bright observing in her quiet way, that second-rate talents gravitated naturally to vagueness, since it required both genius and patience to deliver a message in such terms that it could be clearly understood.

When we assembled in the library for our conference over the stolen masterpiece, Leonard Bright looked less worried, less possessed by one idea. I attributed this to Margaret's happy gift of helping people by clearing up their minds and calming their spirits as a preliminary to their approaching a puzzling subject from a new standpoint.

But Bright seemed as reluctant to speak of the picture as if it were a lost love; and Margaret — born confessor that she is — began to question him. "The seven strangers, who were they, Leonard?"

"Three high-school teachers, two married

## THIS WAY OUT

ladies from the next station up the Line; and two art-students, young men from the Academy," he replied.

"Neither school-teachers, nor art-students are the likeliest people to steal masterpieces," Margaret commented. "Now for your friends."

"Oh, please!" Bright protested, "that's going too far, Margaret."

"I only ask you to tell me who they were."

"Thomas Bennett, lawyer; Ralph Harding, architect, and Barry Ford—the miniature painter."

"Presumably they are all picture lovers whatever their occupations."

"Bennett admires the Primitives. Harding would sell his soul for a Whistler etching. Ford has no great enthusiasm except for miniatures. He is a collector as well as a painter."

Margaret's mind had evidently switched to another aspect of the subject, for she said: "I suppose visitors come when they can without regard to the weather; but was the last visitors' day bright or dull?"

Her host looked puzzled, as if he did not understand why she should ask such a question.

## THE LOST WATTEAU

"Rather dull," he replied, "though it didn't rain. Ford's eyesight is so bad of late that I wondered at his coming on a dark afternoon."

"Do you know whether the lights were turned on early?"

"Graham said it didn't occur to him to turn on the lights until it was nearly a quarter to five. No one asked for them."

"When did your friends leave — and in what order?"

Bright looked troubled. I could see that it was distasteful in the extreme to him, to have his friends before the bar of judgment. "I wish you'd question the Curator, Margaret," he said deprecatingly.

Mr. Graham was summoned — an old man with the gentle face and manner of one whose life has been spent in the main among beautiful inanimate things. He had come to Five Oaks originally to arrange and catalogue Bright's Greek and Roman coins, and had remained to extend his care to the paintings, as, in his modest way, he was an authority on the period they represented.

He seemed glad that a fresh mind was em-

## THIS WAY OUT

played on the problem of the missing Watteau. Margaret without preliminaries questioned him concerning the exits of Mr. Bright's friends.

"Mr. Harding and Mr. Bennett went away together about four," he replied. "Mr. Ford about four-thirty."

"Did they talk together while in the gallery?"

"Mr. Harding and Mr. Bennett talked quite a bit in front of the new Fragonard. Mr. Ford just nodded to them — that was all! When he came in he asked me how I was. 'Very well for March, Sir,' I replied. 'And you?' 'All months are alike to me, now,' he answered, looking very sad."

Margaret turned to her host. "Has this trouble with his eyes depressed him?" she asked.

Leonard Bright hesitated an instant. He was possessed of a delicacy of feeling not usual these days when people discuss their own and their friends' emotions, as they might a dinner entrée. He replied reluctantly, "There have been rumours that Ford had a disappointing love-affair, when he was last in Europe."

A little smile flitted over Margaret's face. "Not a symptom for the theft of a painting! By

## THE LOST WATTEAU

the way, Leonard, of whom did you purchase the Watteau?"

"It belonged originally to the Marquis de Prindeville, whose reverses forced him to sell his gallery ten years ago, when this painting came under the hammer. I believe he was most reluctant to part with it, as Watteau himself had given it to a former Marquise de Prindeville for her bridal gift. The eldest daughter of the house had always inherited it, so it really didn't belong to the Marquis but to his daughter. She, however, sacrificed her claim to her Father's interests."

Margaret mused over this information with the look in her face that I was accustomed to see there when she was evoking some incident from her rich store of memories. She said at last, "The Marquis de Prindeville's eldest daughter died some years ago. He was in mourning for her when I met him in London. His second daughter was with him at the time — a beautiful woman — herself in mourning for her husband."

"I know nothing of their personal history," Leonard commented.

"Suppose, Madam, we go to the pictures," the

## THIS WAY OUT

Curator suggested, "and view the spot where the Watteau hung. Something may be suggested to you by the aspects of the gallery."

As we entered the place the first thing that occurred to me was that it would not be possible from the Curator's desk at the entrance to see into the wing that formed the short arm of the ell-shaped gallery; and I mentioned this.

"But this entrance forms also the only exit," Bright explained. "Any one leaving the gallery has to pass Mr. Graham's desk."

Margaret looked closely at the door and the desk; then went back a moment into the hall that formed a kind of ante-chamber to the gallery. "Where does that door lead?" she inquired, indicating a large double door on one side of the hall.

"Into the garden," Bright replied. "It is only opened on visitors' days."

The Curator, shaking his head in perplexity, preceded us down the gallery and into the wing that formed the short arm of the ell, and paused at last before the vacant space where the Watteau had hung; a space indicated by an oblong of darker brown in the faded denim background.

## THE LOST WATTEAU

"Next to a Lancret," Margaret commented, "and that is a landscape with figures also."

We gazed at the spectral oblong, sole witness of a vanished masterpiece. Margaret went on to examine the only window the gallery contained in addition to the skylights — a square casement with panes of ground glass hinged like doors for the purpose of ventilation. "Some work has been done here recently," she said to the Curator, who, with a look of admiration for her perspicacity, explained that on the afternoon the picture was stolen a fresh pane of glass had been put in.

"So there were eleven people in the gallery instead of ten," Margaret commented.

"I told Mr. Bright of the glazier, but as Perkins is a good honest workman, who wouldn't know a chromo from a Corot, we dismissed him from our calculations."

"Did he bring tools?"

"A few, which he carried in his hand."

"Anything else?"

"He had a flat flannel case with handles, in which he carried panes of glass of different sizes."

On Bright's face was an expression of wonder,



## THIS WAY OUT

as if he did not understand the purport of Margaret's questions, but was willing to await his moment of enlightenment.

"Did he carry this case when he went out?" she asked.

The Curator looked at her for an instant as if he suspected her of witch-work. "No! he left it behind! Mr. Ford called my attention to it and said he'd take it to Perkins's shop in the village, as he had to pass there on his way to the station."

"Mr. Ford knew Perkins, then?"

"Barry used to live out on the Line, near here," Bright explained.

"I thought it very kind of Mr. Ford to take the trouble," Graham commented in the tone of a champion, "and save Perkins a trip back."

"So it was not literally true that every one left with free hands," Margaret said.

"No — because Mr. Ford carried the bag with two panes of glass still in it. I could see their edges," the Curator replied.

"What kind of a frame had the Watteau?" Margaret inquired of Bright.

"A wood frame, carved and gilded."

## THE LOST WATTEAU

"Concave, convex or flat?"

"Flat in effect — if not actually flat."

"What did the painting measure — including the frame?"

Bright turned to Graham, who answered, "Eleven by seventeen inches."

"Will you bring me a tape-measure?" Margaret said to the Curator.

I wondered what she had in mind. When the measure was produced she applied it to the patch of unfaded denim.

"Fourteen by twenty — larger than the Watteau. Now for the Lancret frame, fourteen by twenty, you see. Please take the Lancret down, Mr. Graham."

An unfaded patch was revealed which Margaret measured, then she turned triumphantly to the little group behind her. "Eleven by seventeen! We've learned at least, Leonard, that your thief had both paintings down, probably undecided which one to take. In his haste and excitement, he re-hung the Lancret in the Watteau's place."

"How did I come to overlook such a simple matter!" Graham exclaimed.

## THIS WAY OUT

"It is extremely difficult to judge dimensions by the eye unless you are a draughtsman," Margaret commented.

"But what do you make of it all!" I questioned.

"Patience, please! I am chiefly concerned now to avoid errors."

"Have you a theory?" Bright asked uneasily, as if he would veer off from evidence that tended to incriminate one of his friends.

"Only for testing purposes," Margaret replied. "Will you let me have a car and a driver, Leonard? I may go into Philadelphia."

"Of course, you can have a car," Miss Bright said, glancing at her brother, who did not immediately echo her words and who seemed ill at ease and apprehensive.

"I'd rather suffer any loss, Margaret," he said at last, "than make a blunder that could never be remedied. Accusing strangers is one thing — but friends —!"

"I understand, Leonard, but you must have confidence in my judgment. I'll not rush in where detectives fear to tread," she said with her charming smile. "I intend to woo the Watteau

## THE LOST WATTEAU

back, not demand it. Well? will you trust me?"  
He capitulated.

Margaret told the chauffeur to drive first to the shop of Perkins, the glazier, whom we were fortunate enough to find behind his counter — a little man of mild and innocent expression. After explaining frankly that she was following up any clue that might lead to the recovery of the painting, she asked Perkins for the measurements of a pane of glass similar to the one he had put into the gallery window.

Perkins with a puzzled air drew out a sheet of glass and applied his rule to it. "Twenty by eighteen," he announced. "Those are particularly large panes, Ma'am."

"When Mr. Ford brought your bag to the shop the other evening it contained two of these panes?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"It was certainly kind of Mr. Ford to save you the trouble of returning for your bag."

A twinkle came into Perkins's blue eyes. "I thought it uncommonly kind of him, Ma'am, for he hates to carry packages."

## THIS WAY OUT

Margaret thanked him and bade him good afternoon, leaving him, without doubt, the most puzzled man in the country. Her next direction to the chauffeur was to drive to the Woman's Exchange in Philadelphia. As we whirled along through the park-like country, beautiful even in its winter bareness, Margaret said little, and I respected a silence, out of which might emerge the paths to a vanished masterpiece. On whose wall did it hang, this little glowing memory of old France? Or was it hidden away in some obscure cellar where no light reached it to evoke its loveliness?

I accompanied Margaret into the Exchange, where she purchased a silk bag and directed the attendant to pack it so that it could be sent away by express. When the package was delivered to her she asked for a pen and ink, and wrote on it:

*Mademoiselle Marie Le Blanc,  
Latesse, France,*

adding the Department in which Latesse was situated.

"This is very mysterious," I commented.  
"Where next?"

## THE LOST WATTEAU

She named a certain express company, at whose office she inquired of the clerk if they could forward a package to Latesse, France. He seemed puzzled and began to consult his books.

"Have you never had a shipment there?" she asked.

"I never heard of the place," he answered.

Margaret suddenly decided to try another express company, in whose office she asked the same questions. The clerk's face brightened as he examined the address on the package. "We shipped a box there only two weeks ago," he exclaimed. "The consignee was a countess."

"The countess de Montfort," Margaret supplied.

The clerk's eyes opened wide with astonishment. "You're right," he exclaimed; then he looked again at the package. "Any street address needed here?"

"No, but wait a minute. I don't believe I'll ship the package to-day."

When we were on the sidewalk again, she turned to me, smiling. "Charles, you look quite sulky, as if I were leading you a dance for nothing. I obtained valuable information at that of-

## THIS WAY OUT

fice; but there was no use shipping the package, because Marie Le Blanc is a myth."

"My dear, I'm mystified — not sulky. You run so far ahead of me!"

"But this is so simple. We'll go now to the Kenyon apartments on Walnut Street."

"Who lives there?" I inquired, as we seated ourselves.

"Barry Ford."

I looked as I felt — apprehensive. "Margaret, you are not doing anything precipitous!"

"I have only put two and two together."

"You are not accusing Ford?"

"Men in love will do wild things," she commented.

"You think he is in love?"

"If the thief had been in need of money he would have taken the Lancet, which is of greater value than the Watteau. That is the utilitarian argument. As for the romantic aspects of the case, the Countess de Montfort is one of the most beautiful and fascinating women in France."

"But what has she to do with Barry Ford?"

"I suspect that she has made him unhappy," Margaret said with a smile.

## THE LOST WATTEAU

"This is beyond me, Margaret. I can't see what you are driving at."

"To be quite plain, then, the Countess de Montfort is the widowed daughter of the Marquis de Prindeville. The package sent to Latesse, where their château is situated, probably contains the Watteau, as it was shipped very soon after the theft of the picture. Both tradition and sentiment assign the Watteau to the Countess de Montfort as eldest daughter of the house since the death of her sister."

"Your clues, Margaret?" I inquired sceptically.

"First, of course, the incident of the glazier's bag, though that might have been merely what it appeared to be on the surface — a kind act on the part of Mr. Ford. The important clue was the re-hanging of the Lancret in the wrong place. Leonard told us that Ford's eyesight is failing. Remember it was a dark afternoon. The lights were not on, and as the two pictures hung side by side, Ford very likely carried both towards the end window to make sure which was the coveted treasure, and, in replacing them, transposed them. He could have done this easily without



## THIS WAY OUT

being seen by the Curator, or by the glazier, who was working on the window with his back turned to the gallery."

"Suppose the glazier hadn't forgotten his bag, what then?" I inquired doubtfully.

Margaret smiled. "Most of the levers of life are unforeseen trifles, that become suddenly instruments of opportunity. If the glazier hadn't left his bag the painting might never have been stolen. In my opinion very little wrong-doing is thought out with the precision of a formula in geometry. People go about for days or weeks with a vague desire in their minds and suddenly some fortunate accident spells opportunity; and they seize upon the occasion. Perkins did leave his bag and thus gave Barry Ford the chance to slip the picture into it for transference from the gallery."

"Ingenious, dear Margaret, but in heaven's name, what will you say to Mr. Ford?"

"I shall introduce myself as a friend of Leonard's, and ask to see the famous collection of miniatures."

I confess I felt very nervous when Margaret sent up her card. What she had written upon it

## THE LOST WATTEAU

must have acted as a talisman, for we were immediately told that Mr. Ford would receive us.

He kept us waiting a few moments in a large room, against whose cool grey walls flamed two or three jewel-like canvases. Bowls of forced jessamine were everywhere, suggesting that this white, heavily fragrant flower had some association for which it was loved.

An upright case contained the collection of miniatures, which were like so many little flowers pinned against the white velvet. Margaret was examining them when I became aware that a man was watching her from a door. His intensely white face and unnaturally bright eyes produced a sinister effect, and I was relieved when he came forward with conventional greetings. He had long wished to meet Mrs. Carpenter, he said.

She spoke at once of his collection, and opening the case, he began to exhibit his treasures. I saw that his long fingers trembled as he displayed tenderly his favourites, infinitely delicate examples of the miniature painter's art. Margaret handled them lovingly, admired them with a discrimination that pleased their owner, and drew him for a moment out of his obvious sadness.

## THIS WAY OUT

"I call them little phials of personality," he said with a wan smile.

"And now may I see your own miniatures?" Margaret asked. "Leonard told me that you always painted a duplicate for yourself."

"I do not often show them," he replied. "I have done very few in these last years — because of my defective eyesight."

But he turned back the leaf of a screen as he spoke and displayed an upright case in which a number of miniatures were grouped. The one in the centre was evidently esteemed above the others, for it was surrounded by a laurel wreath done delicately in gold. The painting itself was of a young and beautiful woman, whose blue eyes addressed the spectator in the universal language of charm.

"I recognise her," Margaret said softly. "You have done her justice."

She did not indicate which miniature she meant, but it was evident that only one existed for him. He replied instantly in a voice not quite firm: "If I could do justice to Madame de Montfort I should be indeed a master."

Margaret looked earnestly at him — pityingly,

## THE LOST WATTEAU

too, I thought, as if she divined that he was a sick man. "I fear you were not really able to receive us," she said gently.

He put his hand to his forehead in a dazed way. "I have already sent for my doctor," he said. "These past three weeks I have not felt — like myself."

"Leonard says you came to see his new Fragonard not long ago — what did you think of it?"

A curiously subtle smile overspread his face. "I am no critic!"

"Perhaps you preferred the Watteau — Madame de Montfort's Watteau!"

"Yes," he said eagerly. "*Her* Watteau. It was hers by right! Did she ever speak of it to you?"

"Never!"

"Where did you meet her?"

"In London some years ago! She was in deep mourning at the time, and she made me think of a brilliant picture in a black frame. She must be wondering now who has restored to her a beloved family heirloom. You probably did not write because your hands will scarcely hold a pen, but

## THIS WAY OUT

when you are well again you must tell her."

He appeared dazed and mistrustful, yet as if he longed to ease his confused and burdened mind. Into his eyes crept an expression that was half-confidential, half-defiant. "She wanted the painting, though she never said so," he muttered. "She used to speak of it often during that summer when she was sitting to me."

Again he put his hand to his head, as if trying to brush some cloud from his brain. "She wished it had never been sold," he went on; "but she knew how much the old Marquis needed money, and she is a good daughter. They bring forth good daughters in la belle France — fair as lilies and true as swords. I felt that I would do anything to make her happy, to give her back her treasure."

"You must tell Leonard how you felt," Margaret said gently. "He loved the Watteau. He misses it very much."

Ford looked troubled.

"Poor old Leonard!" he murmured. "I didn't mean to make trouble — but I'd do anything for her. You understand!"

"Yes — one would do much for Madame de

## THE LOST WATTEAU

Montfort," Margaret assented, as if she could comprehend any strange expression of devotion. "She has promised to visit me some day. You may meet her on this side of the Atlantic."

A look of keenest joy lit up his face, but he remained silent.

"Meanwhile, may I tell Leonard how it all came about?" Margaret continued.

"Yes, please tell him," he said with feverish eagerness. "You can make him understand, because you have seen her, and know her charm! He may — forgive —"

Suddenly he broke off, his hands groping for the back of a chair, against which he leaned. I went to his assistance, but just at that moment the servant ushered in a man of professional appearance who took in the situation at a glance and hurried to Ford's side.

We returned to our host with an astonishing tale to which Leonard and his sister listened, their incredulity and sense of affront changing at last to pity under Margaret's skilful presentation of Ford's case. The physician's verdict of fever evidently relieved their minds of a heavy

## THIS WAY OUT

weight of judgment; for a romance imperative enough to make a thief of a man was beyond their comprehension.

"It wouldn't surprise me at all," Margaret concluded, "if you received a letter from Madame de Montfort asking you to clear up the mystery."

Bright looked thoroughly uncomfortable at this prospect. "What on earth could I say!" he ejaculated.

"You'll have to explain what a man did who was both ill and in love."

"I am not in a position to write sympathetically of the matter," Leonard said with a sardonic smile. "You traced the Watteau, and you are a friend of the Countess. You should write the letter!"

Margaret laughed. "Your logic is irresistible. I suppose I'll have to tell the story. Since Mr. Ford's whole thought under stress of illness was for Madame de Montfort, she couldn't very well feel harshly towards him."

Bright reflected a moment. He longed for his treasure, yet it was evident that his imagination had been captured by the romance of the circumstances which had wrested the Watteau from

## THE LOST WATTEAU

him. "It would be difficult to demand the picture back under the circumstances," he said at last. "She would hate to give it up a second time, and, considering the romantic impulse that was back of Barry's fever, I'll have to forgive him — and let her keep the picture. I can do that much for sentiment," he added with a sigh, "but you can tell Madame de Montfort better than I can how luck ran her way."

A month later I was calling on Margaret, when the foreign mail was brought in. Among the letters was one postmarked Latesse, France. Margaret read it, then handed it to me, remarking, "Of course, she keeps her treasure! but she intimates that a change of fortune enables her to pay Leonard what he once paid her. One can't really blame her for jumping at the chance to rescue it; but poor Leonard must wish that his friend's delirium hadn't taken such a practical turn!"

The letter was charming — like the fragrance of flowers from an old French garden. Under the formal expressions of regret for the extraordinary chain of events that had sent the painting back to France, was a very perceptible satisfaction over its recovery.



## THIS WAY OUT

She concluded, "I am deeply indebted to Monsieur Bright for his generosity and for the faithfulness he has exhibited towards his afflicted friend, in which, dear Madame Carpenter, I know from your gracious letter, you are a partaker. I have the most amiable memories of the talented miniaturist, and it will be a pleasure to meet him again when I visit America, by which time, I trust, all will be well with him."

"Do 'amiable memories' imply a tender feeling?" I said as I handed the letter back to Margaret, who replied:

"As I remember the Countess de Montfort, she is not the woman to let such an extravagant act of romance go unrewarded. By the way, you notice there is a postscript asking for the address of 'le pauvre' Monsieur. I think when Barry Ford is well enough to write a letter the romance may end as all romances should — with a wedding!"

**CHAPTER VIII**  
**THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR**



## CHAPTER VIII

### THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR

**W**E recalled afterwards that when the telephone rang Margaret and I were talking of ghosts, a subject usually evoked by low lights, an open fire and over-the-shoulder glances towards dark doorways and passages not quite clear of footsteps. To sharp ears and lively imaginations any house can furnish disturbing noises — short sounds resembling raps, whispering rustles as of dry leaves drawn lightly by the draught over the floors, and curiously cautious creaking of stairs, as if a person or persons proceeded, then passed. We listen! they vanish. We forget them — again the uncertain tread!

I am neither prepared to acknowledge the presence of spirits reluctant to move on, or to dismiss the supernatural as against reason. I am a strong believer in that Will which focussed

## THIS WAY OUT

through a concentrated mind can re-arrange atoms or change a human destiny. On this evening in question I was saying to Margaret, "The next war will be fought with electricity, not powder; and the next after that with X-rays powerful enough to pierce mountains, and finally men will combat each other through their thoughts." She had just replied, "Our ghost-stories will some day furnish generals with undreamed-of tactics," when the telephone rang, and she was summoned.

Upon her return she looked both puzzled and amused. "The Sheratons want me to come to their Fifth Avenue house at once," she announced.

"Who are the Sheratons?"

"Three spinsters, absurdly rich, and cowed long-ago by their father and his fortune. They do their own marketing and peer at the Avenue from behind their curtains, as if it was a village street. I have sent for a taxicab. Will you go with me?"

On our way she told me more of these three women to whom nothing had ever happened.

## THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR

Their repressed girlhood had by grey gradations become a dreary middle-age across whose monotony one flash had fallen, the sudden death of a tyrannical father — a cold eternal ray revealing a liberty they had no longer the will to embrace. "They put on black and continued to economise. I am one of the few people they sometimes invite to dinner, and I always accept because I am always hoping to discover some change in them for the better. They are really entombed! I think the tradition of their father still keeps them prisoners.

"They were not fond of him at all; they were afraid of him, the kind of fear dependent women have for the man who will not let them launch out for themselves; and who half-despises them because they haven't married. Yet they believed in him, and admired his generalship. When he was overbearing they thought he was within his rights as a self-made man."

"Are you at liberty to tell me why they have sent for you?"

"It is a case of fright, over what may prove to be a very simple matter. That they should call

## THIS WAY OUT

me up shows me that they have a superstitious awe of their father's room; they had it, indeed, when he was alive."

"Is there anything wrong — in their father's room?"

She drew her fur cloak closer about her as she replied:

"Miss Sarah says there is a mysterious light under his door. Of course, she is alarmed because no one has occupied his room since his death a year ago."

"But why don't they open the door. Must they call in their friends for such a simple matter?"

"Ah, there you have an example of the force of their tradition! Only the maids ever enter the room, and even they decline to go into it at night!"

"Why don't these frightened sisters send them for the police?"

"If you knew Miss Sarah and her sisters, Lavinia and Mehitabel you wouldn't ask such a question. Whatever is happening they will deal with it surreptitiously with no loss of privacy or dignity. Miss Sarah seemed nearly ill with

## THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR

alarm, yet she was unwilling the servants should know. Ah, here we are!"

The taxicab had stopped before a detached brick house whose walled garden extended the premises for at least three city blocks. A maid admitted us to a sombre library, where we found awaiting us Miss Sarah, a little faded lady dressed in black. I saw that her hand trembled as she extended it to Margaret.

"It's still there," she whispered. "Sister Hitty is watching. Lavinia is in bed with a cold. We thought best not to tell her."

"Have the servants discovered it?" Margaret inquired.

"They never go on that floor — after six. My room is beyond — Father's. I was on my way to it after dinner when I observed — this light. My agitation was extreme. I listened. I heard nothing. I tried to summon my courage, to call out 'who's there?' or to try the handle of the door, but I had not the will-power. I have suffered from nervousness," she added with an apologetic glance in my direction.

"Perhaps one of the maids left the electric light burning," I suggested.



## THIS WAY OUT

"The house is lit by gas," Miss Sarah replied.

A silence fell upon us. I felt oddly disturbed by the tension that filled the atmosphere of this old home, as if persons unseen were holding their breath, or were watching us from the dimly-lighted hall. Had I caught the contagion of a nervous woman's fears, or was this my response to Margaret's creepy, sketchy, stories of certain experiences of hers in English country houses?

"Shall we go up?" Miss Sarah whispered.

We nodded silently, as if spoken words might dissolve some spell, and followed Sarah Sheraton down the hall, our heel-taps ringing hollow on the black-and-white marble floor. A high, steep staircase of the old New York type led to the upper stories, its curve at each landing marked by an arched recess in the sidewall. We emerged at last in a hall that contained a solitary gas-fixtute upon which a bead of light flickered and revealed a figure that stood just beneath the fixture; another faded woman in stiff, stealthy attitude, like a cat watching a mouse. Intense concentration was in the round eyes behind the glasses. Her arms hung straight and tense at

## THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR

her sides; her palms were pressed flat against the wall.

From a very narrow crack under an opposite door a light shone.

We tip-toed down the hall, and Miss Sarah spoke to her sister. Miss Mehitabel's muscles relaxed, and she gave a sigh of relief.

"So glad you've come," she whispered to Margaret. "There's not a sound. Maybe Mr. Ritzenhouse would go in," she added with a hopeful glance at me.

I nodded by way of expressing my willingness for the undertaking, yet I did not move towards the door, which had a singularly forbidding aspect as if it had been closed for years upon family affection, upon enthusiasm, upon free and natural intercourse. The light that came from beneath it was steady, suggesting that no windows could be open to produce a draught in which gas might flicker.

"Pa used to work in his room with the door closed," Miss Sarah whispered. "There was always a light under his door no matter how late we went to bed."

"No matter how late," Miss Mehitabel echoed.

## THIS WAY OUT

"We never dared disturb him," Miss Sarah said.

"O, we never disturbed him," Miss Mehitabel repeated.

Margaret glanced at me. I had an uncanny notion that I was now to break with tradition and disturb Sylvester Sheraton. I still hesitated, not afraid, but reluctant. The two faded women gazing with intense nervousness at the door of the room once occupied by their father — this spectacle was putting a check upon my intentions.

"Do you wish me to go into the room, Miss Sheraton?" I asked.

Her eyes, peculiarly appealing, besought me to act, but her words expressed a strange fright, as if some long-ago dread were translated into a new apprehension.

"Are you armed?" she asked.

"Of course not," I said with a smile. "Do I need to be?"

"Perhaps you had better—"

"Do you wish me to call a policeman?" I interrupted.

"Oh, no! no!"

## THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR

All her "sheltered" years were in the exclamation. She and her sister exchanged glances, then they both looked at the light under the door. I realised with sudden impatience that what was happening to me was just that I had caught too well the infection of their dread, their peculiar awe of this room, of this door behind which their father had woven the schemes that had made him famous in the world, but a riddle to his three overlooked daughters. It was not a sanctuary, but the lurking place of a hard memory, the casket that held a secret enmity, the spot that made the whole house inhospitable.

"Of course, if you want to discover what the trouble is I must go in," I said. "We'll never find out staring at the light under the door."

A melancholy "no" came from the two sisters. They again glanced at each other. Margaret whispered to me: "Try the handle. They are unnerved. They can't decide."

I took a step or two forward and laid my finger on the cold bronze handle of the door. In the same instant a bell rang violently below, and Miss Sarah commanded "Wait."

## THIS WAY OUT

I withdrew my hand from the knob and turned.

"If it is a caller," she whispered, "we'd better wait a moment. Hitty, you go down. I don't want Jane to find us here."

Mehitabel obeyed with a curious furtive glance backward, but as she approached the staircase the ghostly-white face of the maid emerged from the gloom of the landing.

"O, Ma'am," we heard her say weakly, then she glanced over her shoulder and uttered a scream. "I didn't tell you to follow me," she said reprovingly to a figure in the gloom behind her.

A woman with a child now came forward into what light there was.

"She asked to see Mr. Sheraton, Ma'am," the maid explained in a trembling voice. "She said she knew he must be in."

Miss Sarah and Miss Mehitabel grew grey as ashes. My own heart was beating rapidly, and over my flesh spread a tingling coldness. The woman looked intently at us, then glanced at the light under the door.

"Isn't he home?" she asked. "I thought he

## THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR

was always at home when there was a light in his room."

The two sisters glanced fearfully at each other. Miss Sarah was the first to find her voice. "I am afraid you have mistaken the house," she said in a weak protest.

"Oh, no! I have gone by it too many times not to know it. That was seven years ago — when we were first married."

"Married! to whom?" Miss Mehitabel exclaimed.

"To Sylvester," the woman replied quietly.

The sisters clung together and stared at the intruder. In contrast to their lifeless refinement, she seemed a very dynamo of crude force. My mind immediately leaped to the idea of blackmail, but the big, frank creature who announced that she was Mrs. Sheraton did not look like an adventuress despite her towseled hair, and the sangfroid of her flat wide hat. Some indefinable element of reliability in her large features was daintily translated in the gentleness and dignity of the child who stood beside her — a little girl with solemn eyes. Though obviously the woman's daughter, she ap-

## THIS WAY OUT

peared, so to speak, in finer binding, a little edition de luxe of the coarsely printed adult.

Mrs. Sheraton stripped off her left glove. A wedding ring was revealed. Then she opened her bag and brought a document which proved to be marriage certificate. The visitor smoothed it out on the broad bannister and handed it to Miss Sarah.

"It's all there," she said laconically.

And it was! Sylvester Sheraton had been united in the bonds of Holy Matrimony to Anabelle Craig in a certain church on a certain day, of a certain year. The two sisters, their lips twitching nervously, held the paper under the gas-jet and gasped in a queer tragic chorus. Margaret looked pityingly at them; then at the big-boned, flamboyant woman who had presumably brought a touch of romance into Sylvester Sheraton's arid old age.

Miss Mehitabel handed the marriage certificate back to Mrs. Sheraton. Her eyes were cold and hostile. Miss Sarah had retreated into the shadows. An embarrassing silence fell upon us which Margaret broke by asking the newly-revealed widow why she had called.

## THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR

"I saw a light in his room," was the murmured answer. "I mightn't have got up my courage but I saw a light in his room."

"How did you know which room was his?"

"He pointed out the window to me that first year we were married."

"Mr. Sheraton's dead. Didn't you know it?" Margaret said.

The woman drew in her breath sharply and put an arm about the little girl. "That's why —" she began, then her voice choked. She glanced towards Miss Sarah. "Your black's for him," she whispered, and looked down at her own plaid dress. "If I'd been notified," she murmured apologetically, "but — but he never wanted you to know. I guess he thought you mightn't take to me," she smiled feebly, then went on: "I was called to Dakota eighteen months ago by my father's illness. Sylvester didn't write often, though the money came regular. Mebbe I'd begun to be an old story. What with my nursin' I wrote precious few letters myself; and this last year none — but here was the child to be thought of. These ladies are your half-sisters, Eunice," she addressed the little girl.



## THIS WAY OUT

The relationship was unmistakable. Between Eunice Sheraton's delicate beauty and the faded features of her half-sisters was one of those strong family likenesses that can link loveliness and withered middle-age without incongruity. The child advanced shyly and held out her hand. I could see that they resented her, yet that she astonished them as much as if the end of a rainbow had dipped into the dim hall. I did not doubt what her ultimate welcome would be. Her beauty was of the kind that opens hearts.

"You are not taking her away again?" Margaret said, as if voicing the secret thoughts of the sisters.

The woman started and flushed. "I don't know," she muttered; then impetuously, "It isn't money I come for. Sylvester made me promise I'd never come for money. I was to have a certain sum every year all my life whether he was alive or dead, that and no more. I signed a paper to that effect. The lawyer, Mr. Bridges, knows."

The sisters exchanged significant glances; then they looked at the light under the door still shin-

## THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR

ing quietly. I recalled that there had been obscure clauses in Sheraton's will, life-bequests to certain persons "to whom he was grateful;" but a marriage had never been suspected, and Mrs. Sheraton, despite her crude appearance, was not of the type to press publicly her honours.

"What I came for," she went on, "was to ask Sylvester to release me. I was never notified of his death, or if I was, the letter never reached me."

She paused. Her own eyes were fixed for a moment on the light under the door.

"It took all my courage to come. I always was sort o' afraid of Mr. Sheraton. On my way here I kep' saying, 'if I see a light in his room I'll ring.' He used to tell me how he sat alone evenin's — always alone in his room, unless he had company. I didn't want to disturb him if he had company."

The eerie feeling returned in full force. We all glanced towards the door; then Margaret said:

"You have new plans for your life?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I want to get married."

## THIS WAY OUT

The truth was out at last. Mrs. Sylvester Sheraton was blushing under the brim of her hat like a school-girl.

"I wanted to play square," she went on, "because of Eunice. She's a good child, if I do say so, and I never wanted her to blush for her mother. I was in a queer position, and I up and come East to end it."

The child was meanwhile exploring the dim hall, with dainty, quiet movements that suggested a self-control not generally possessed by small persons of six years. She discovered a diminutive book-case somewhere in the shadows, and before this she stood with her hands clasped and gazed rapturously at some little china animals on its shelves.

"Mother! see!" she exclaimed.

"She won't touch 'em," Mrs. Sheraton said proudly. "I used to slap her hands if she touched things. I've tried to bring her up right." She sighed as if the worst of the task was over.

The two sisters watched the little girl with fascinated eyes, and with something of the astonishment they might have displayed if a Paris doll

## THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR

had suddenly begun to walk and talk. It was evident that they wished to open a conversation with their new kinswoman, but hardly knew how to begin. Perhaps they were searching their minds for vocabularies long rusty.

Miss Mehitabel waited awkwardly in the background but the mother-love denied all these long years to Miss Sarah was dawning in her face. Suddenly her stiff figure bent, and little smiling lines came about her mouth; she stooped before the child and drew her hungrily to her. "Wouldn't you like to stay with us awhile?" she murmured coaxingly.

"In this big house?"

"Yes, with your — sisters!"

Eunice nodded.

"Could I play with the china dog?"

"Bless her heart, yes!" Miss Mehitabel exclaimed.

The child looked about her. "Who's in that room?" she asked, and pointed to the light under the door.

The sisters exchanged glances.

"Nobody's there," Miss Mehitabel replied in a trembling voice.

## THIS WAY OUT

"Open the door," Margaret whispered to me. Before there was time for a protest I had turned the knob — and faced darkness!

I struck a match and lit the gas. The room thus revealed had the chill of unused places and the precision of its appointments suggested the finality of death itself. I raised the shades, but no light came into the room from outside. Miss Mehitabel, with a scared face, opened the door into the clothes-closet, Miss Sarah the one that gave access to the bathroom. Both places were empty.

No one said a word, but I knew what each of us was thinking — "Did I see a light under the door, or didn't I! I couldn't have seen a light under the door, for the room was dark when the door was opened." Mrs. Sheraton's high colour had left her, and the two sisters were trembling. Only Eunice was at ease. She flitted about the room examining it with a child's frank curiosity. The fire-dogs were soldiers in brightly painted uniforms, and before these she knelt with wonder in her eyes.

"Were they father's little men?" she asked.

Miss Mehitabel bent over her with a coaxing

## THE LIGHT UNDER THE DOOR

manner. "How would you like this room for your very own? You can sleep here to-night, and we'll have a fire on the hearth — and perhaps — perhaps your mother would stay with you, so you wouldn't feel so strange!"

Mrs. Sheraton replied with a smile whose warmth seemed able to take away forever the tomb-like aspect of a dreaded room. I saw a dawning relief in the faces of the two sisters, as if they looked forward with an interest and pleasure new to them, to transforming a citadel of dreary memories, into a happy child's nursery.

"Well!" Margaret exclaimed as we drove away. "Did we see the light under the door — or didn't we?"

"Could six people be mistaken?" I counter-questioned.

"I don't know how to explain it, but I believe there was some one in that room!" she answered gravely.

"Dead or alive?"

"Alive, of course! not, perhaps, what we call being alive."

## THIS WAY OUT

"So you think the light was a — beacon!"

"You remember what Mrs. Sheraton said,"  
was Margaret's comment.

**CHAPTER IX**  
**THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT**





## CHAPTER IX

### THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

“**S**IR:— I am sending by post specimens of wheat from my farm. I have about one hundred and fifty bushels, or would consider selling half the quantity. I also enclose five sovereigns English gold, for value of which please remit check. Will be pleased to deliver wheat in Philadelphia subject to your order.

“Yours truly,

“AMOS WHITE.”

Henry Clayton handed this letter to me remarking, “Some old farmer wants to do a bit of business.”

I read the communication, and then passed it to Margaret. We were spending a few weeks of the first summer after our marriage at an old inn near Radnor, where my friend Clayton, a director of the Jefferson Bank of Philadelphia, has a country place. We had been dining with

## THIS WAY OUT

him and were taking our coffee in the library when the mail was brought in.

"I suppose this box contains the wheat and the gold," Clayton added; and opened a little package which proved to be an ordinary safety match box, where in a bed of wheat lay the gold pieces, five pounds in all. After removing these Clayton examined the grain.

"Sound enough," he commented, "but I don't want to buy. I am over stocked already."

A fortnight later I had occasion to go to the Jefferson Bank on Third Street. As I passed the broad glass windows of the Directors' Room I saw Clayton raise his hand and beckon me to come in.

"Are you often here?" I asked as he admitted me.

"Very seldom, but I received a notice from the bank to-day that I had overdrawn my account by eight hundred dollars. You look surprised," he added with a smile.

"I didn't know that the director of a bank ever overdrew his account."

"I was astonished myself. I thought first I'd send a clerk to have my book written up; then

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

I decided to come around, and it didn't take me long to find out what the trouble was. Look at this."

He produced a returned check for twenty-four hundred dollars. "Never issued it," he commented.

"Isn't that your signature?" I asked.

"Of course it's mine, but examine it closely."

He handed me a powerful glass. I had never seen a raised check, and I confess I looked admiringly at the neat workmanship. What possibilities it suggested of paying the butcher's bill without toil or care!

"Have you any idea who forged this?"

"My stub says it was the old hayseed who wanted to sell me his wheat, and there's his name on the back of the check. I did on July 6th make out a check to Amos White for twenty-four dollars. He must have seen great possibilities in it, for the cashier of this bank just a week later paid out twenty-four hundred dollars to a man of such indefinite appearance that he doesn't even remember him clearly — thinks he might know him again if he saw him, isn't sure."

## THIS WAY OUT

"Henry, this is a case for Margaret," I said gravely.

He shook his head. "Margaret never handled anything like this."

"That's not saying she couldn't!"

He looked at me as if he were reflecting, "You are still very much in love, old man," but aloud he said: "Telephone Mrs. Rittenhouse to come in and take lunch with us, and we'll talk it over."

An hour or so later while we were awaiting Margaret at the Bellevue-Stratford, I asked Clayton where Amos White lived.

"He gave his address as Quakertown, Pa.," he replied. "But no Amos White is known there. I suppose that was a part of the trick."

When Margaret arrived she was immensely interested in the matter, having been "in at the start," so to speak, when the match-box and the letter were received. That a farmer should prove to be a forger seemed a reversal of the old gold-brick scheme in which the victim was the rustic. She examined the check eagerly.

"Your man is probably a gang of men," she

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

commented. "This is too well done to be the work of one person."

She proceeded to ask certain questions. Who was the teller of the Jefferson Bank? Why did he pay out such a large sum without proper identification of the person presenting the check? To this Clayton replied that his own signature on the check probably influenced the teller to pay the money without investigation.

While we were talking Clayton was called to the telephone. He returned wearing a broad smile. "I think the matter will soon be cleared up," he said. "A firm of detectives has just sent word to the bank that they understand a forged check has been paid. They claim they have a copy of the check in its original form to back up their presumption. We'd better return to the bank. The detectives will arrive soon after three."

I wondered if the matter would be cleared up as quickly as Clayton believed. As a lawyer I always expect delays, for in this arabesque of a universe there are apparently no straight lines between any two points.

The bank had closed its doors to the public

## THIS WAY OUT

when we arrived, but the young clerks were still bending over their books and some one was counting aloud in that monotonous chant that always suggests to my mind the adjuration of a heathen god under brassy tropical skies. Scrub women were already purifying the tessellated marble floor, and men were polishing the sheets of plate glass and the heavy door knobs. The place smelled of soap and fresh money, while tinklings as pleasant as ice against glass in summer came from troughs where bright little coins were kept moving. Stacks of salad-green-and-grey bills sent out their sharp, clean odour. A poor man, or even a rich could not have sniffed it without exhilaration!

Margaret was admitted to the council of the directors after a brief explanation on Clayton's part. The President of the bank had known her father and needed no introduction to her. The clean-shaven young men in their glass cages cast admiring glances at her, as she entered the room where the directors were gathered about a long table. The raised check was passed from hand to hand with varying comments over the audacity and skill of the forgers.

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

After a while two men were ushered in, both pink-cheeked and blue-eyed, with the appearance of genial butchers.

"I'm Griggs," said one of them, and patted his partner's shoulder. "This gentleman is the other half of the firm, Jimmie West. Our man Desmond is outside. He has been on the track of those forgers for months, and it was his trick — the farmer business."

"What have you to show us as proof of your statement?" asked the bank president.

West produced an exact duplicate of the check in the form that Clayton had originally issued it, and we all examined it carefully. "You acknowledge it is the same, gentlemen?" Griggs said, looking about the circle. "Now, how did we get it! Desmond is in our employ. For months we've scented a gang of forgers in Baltimore, but we couldn't get enough evidence. Finally Desmond nosed his way through. When he had spotted his men he made a proposition to 'em, and they bit quick as hell. This was the game he put up to them. He was to be Amos White, farmer, from Quakertown, Pennsylvania; he was to send to Mr. Clayton English gold for exchange,



## THIS WAY OUT

and a sample of wheat to throw him off the scent. Desmond carried this out, and in reply received a letter from your director with his check for the gold, at the general delivery window in the Quakertown post-office. He brought it straight to us. We steamed open the envelope, made this copy of the check, put it back, and Desmond took it to the gang in Baltimore. They dressed it up, and later Desmond learned that your bank had honoured it. What he doesn't know is, which man finished the job, for there are three of them. We'd like a description from your teller."

A man near the end of the table rose and said, "I am the teller."

I thought him just the person to make such a blunder, if one could judge by his appearance. He was a mild little man of refined and gentle aspect, who looked as if he had too much faith in human nature.

"I don't remember the man," he was saying. "Quite as clearly as I recall the introduction he brought from a friend of mine in Baltimore, a card of John D. Wetherill, on which was written, 'introducing Mr. Amos White.' I know Wetherill's handwriting very well, and I saw

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

nothing to make me suspicious. I asked a few general questions, which were answered promptly — and then paid out the money. When I telegraphed Wetherill to-day, I received this reply: 'Once gave a card to a book-agent named White to get rid of him — thought you Jeff people were foxes — too bad!' ”

“Now, ain't that slick,” commented Griggs, dreamily stroking his pink boyish cheek. I imagined him judging all the processes of existence by this quality of “slickness;” and patiently polishing up his own soul to the same state of smooth deception.

“Can you remember how the man looked?” asked West of Mr. Stonington, the teller.

“I'd probably know him if I saw him again,” the latter replied. “But I have only a faint recollection of him. What I remember most clearly is the pattern of his necktie — small orange spots on a dark blue ground.”

The two detectives looked at each other with a meaning smile.

“Get Desmond in,” murmured West.

Desmond was produced. His eyes too near together, his long, sad nose and crooked, melan-

## THIS WAY OUT

choly mouth were the features of a man who had tested the world and found it lacking. I wasn't so sure that he had embraced a high standard of morality. I rather inclined to the belief that the fervour of his conscience was determined by the denomination of a bill. He surveyed us with depression.

The President asked him questions, but could get very little from him. He exhibited a kind of dejected pride over the things he could tell if he would.

"Them fellows aren't easy caught," he assured us. "They met me in a different place each time. Their names were funny — didn't sound real. Necktie? No. I disremember any blue necktie with orange spots."

"Can you describe the three men to us?" Margaret asked.

He looked wonderingly at her. "The man called Creston is tall, with black hair and eyes — wears glasses. Kenney and Strunk are shorter, rather fair-complected."

"My man didn't have black hair. I am sure of that," said the teller.

"Now, Mr. Griggs and Mr. West," said the

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

President bluntly, "what do you want for your services?"

"Arrest or conviction?" Griggs asked blandly.

"Arrest, of course. We have a clear case. Conviction shouldn't be difficult."

The two detectives conferred with each other, then with the dejected Desmond.

"If your teller will come to Baltimore when we send for him," Griggs said at last, "our man here will see that he has a look at the gang. If he can spot the man who presented the check, the rest's easy."

It seemed, indeed, very simple. There was some further discussion as to the price to be paid to the detectives for their services, then we separated. Clayton accompanied Margaret and myself to the depot.

"What do you make of it?" he asked her.

"I think there's a clear road to Baltimore; but beyond I can't say. The identification doesn't seem to me a simple matter at all."

"Why not?" asked Clayton.

"You sometimes fail to recognise a woman because she has a different hat on or has changed her way of doing her hair. Identifying people

## THIS WAY OUT

is a process as full of pitfalls as presenting circumstantial evidence. Clothing, jewelry, even physical characteristics are misleading. Only the soul can be surely identified."

Clayton and I laughed.

"What an amazing statement, Margaret!" I said.

"No — very reasonable. Clothing changes. Character doesn't; at least it changes so slowly that you can keep up with the links."

"But how can the law deal with souls?" I exclaimed.

"It can't. It has to deal with gestures. The law makes its deductions from pantomime. To attend a trial is like seeing a motion picture. You judge strictly from tableau."

Events crowded upon events in the matter of the Jefferson Bank forgery. Mr. Stonington having been stationed in a barber shop in a side street in Baltimore, the decoy Desmond marched his three men past the window.

"That's the man!" the agitated teller whispered to the detectives, "the man in the light overcoat."

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

It proved to be Strunk.

A warrant was sworn out for his arrest. A requisition was obtained from the Governor of Pennsylvania on the Governor of Maryland for Strunk, who was brought to Philadelphia and jailed. The President of the bank not long after received anonymous letters offering money for the release of Strunk. These letters were post-marked Baltimore, but the writers could not be found. It was discovered that Strunk had rented a box in a safe deposit company of Baltimore, and the Jefferson Bank took out an attachment, to prevent monies being taken from the box.

We awaited the trial with interest. My vacation was over, but Margaret stayed on awhile, and I spent my week-ends with her. Clayton came in often to report the progress of the lawyer for the prosecution. Desmond it seems had found out just on what day and train the forger was to go to Philadelphia to present the raised cheque, and he had accompanied him (a plausible Judas) to the depot, and had seen him off on the seven o'clock evening train, on Sunday, July 13th.

## THIS WAY OUT

This piece of evidence seemed to interest Margaret more than any.

"People's travelling companions have time to observe them," she remarked to Clayton. "There's nothing so favourable for a good survey of a person as a railroad journey. I wonder who was on that train."

Clayton carried her suggestion to the lawyer for the prosecution. He unearthed a coloured porter and a Pullman conductor who appeared to recognise Strunk's photographs. Questioned as to the other passengers they remembered mainly the "Bunch of Roses" Company, that was to open in Philadelphia on Monday evening, July 14th — a girl show of minor importance. The members of the company had made a lot of noise, the conductor said. Most of them were in the day coaches, but half a dozen or so had the price of a Pullman chair. The conductor couldn't be sure that they had spoken to any particular man, as they had talked to anybody who would listen. He was "sick of the bunch," he declared by the time they reached Philadelphia.

After some weeks the trial came on, an edify-

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

ing exhibition of the limitations of the law. The prosecution, after all its work, had a difficult time of it—owing probably to the intermediate operations of the defence. As a lawyer I knew perfectly well into what phantasmal unreal beings solid, flesh-and-blood witnesses can be alchemised. I was familiar with the jugglery by which a State citizen can be made as elusive as a mist-wraith. In this particular case a muscular porter weighing probably one hundred and eighty pounds, disappeared like morning dew, and a conductor suffered a complete loss of memory. To cap the climax, a stodgy harness-maker arrived from Baltimore with a greasy account-book to show that at the very hour Strunk was supposed to be cashing a raised check in Philadelphia, he had been buying a set of harness in Baltimore. The prosecution lost its case. Strunk's safe-deposit box, when opened, was found to contain nothing but newspapers.

When Margaret, Clayton and I left the court room we had a common impression that we had attended opera-bouffe.

"Of course, that's the end of it," Clayton said



## THIS WAY OUT

with gloomy disapproval. "I'm the donkey! I'm the hayseed! Gold in the wheat! Why I couldn't see past my nose."

"But it isn't the end," Margaret broke in. "The law's through. Now let us begin the real work."

"Begin?" Clayton said sceptically. "How? Where?"

"Where they left off — of course."

"Margaret," I said firmly, "you are not going to chase a blue necktie with orange spots around the country."

"I am, indeed," she said gaily. "And I shall not send a bill to the Jefferson Bank for my services."

Clayton looked amused. "If you can catch the forger you'll surpass any record you've ever made."

Margaret looked equal to her task, but she said nothing. When Clayton had left us she led me to a Union news stand, and inquired for a Theatre Gazette. "I want to see if the 'Bunch of Roses' has withered or fallen apart — or if it is still on the road," she explained.

The Gazette told nothing. We went next to a

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

vaudeville agency. A fat man in a check suit, chewing gum, received us. I think he imagined we wanted to do a turn then and there, and, of course, we would get the hook! His contemptuous cold grey eye said as much.

Margaret propounded her question!

"Bunch of Roses? — bunch of carrots!" the fat man snorted.

"Where is the Company now?" Margaret asked.

"They busted somewhere in the State — Pittsburgh, I think it was — last September; they were out for summer business and didn't get it."

"Is there any way that I could get the names of the girls?"

He shook his head. Whether he wouldn't tell or couldn't tell was a mystery; his air of scornful suspicion being too much for our sense of humour, we withdrew.

"Now to the nearest telegraph office," Margaret said. "I want to wire an advertisement to the Pittsburgh and Baltimore papers; and I shall insert the same advertisement in the Philadelphia dailies."

I looked over her shoulder as she wrote it. It

## THIS WAY OUT

ran: "Any member of the former 'Bunch of Roses' Company who reads this will confer a favour by communicating with Charles Rittenhouse, Fabric Building, New York."

"Now when they answer, sort out the Philadelphia addresses and send them on to me, Charles."

"Ah, but there's the point—will they answer!"

"They will if they read the advertisement—especially if they are out of work, poor things."

"What are you up to?"

"Wait and see," she said.

There were three answers from Philadelphia. I brought them over myself, for I had warned Margaret that I should not allow her to go to strange addresses without me. The first place we went to was in a horrid part of the city near Sixth and Vine Streets, a district once dedicated to staid Quaker families and now given over to the underworld. We found the Bessie Magee of the letter in a cheap actors' boarding house, a lean, grey-skinned woman, with hair of at least seven different shades, ranging from its original

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

colour of a dark rusty brown, to a high chemical carrot. She wore a shabby taffeta dress and an odour of patchouli hung about her. She surveyed Margaret with the frankest astonishment I have ever seen in a human being's eyes.

"Glad to know you!" she murmured. "Happy to make your acquaintance," she addressed me, and I detected spearmint through the patchouli.

It is a trait of Margaret's that she takes people into her confidence. She has a theory that they respond to a truthful appeal and rarely take advantage of it. But Margaret believes in human nature to an alarming degree. In this case she told Miss Magee quite frankly what the object of her visit was; and that young lady punctuated her narrative with such exclamations as "I should worry!" and "What's this you're handin' me!" "You don't mean it — really?"

Yet she seemed genuinely interested and ready to help. With one hand on her hip, and one elbow on the alarmingly dirty scarf that covered the mantelpiece, she half-closed her eyes under her tousled hair and reflected.

"Let me see — there was some fresh guys on

## THIS WAY OUT

that Pullman, includin' the conductor and a black lobster of a porter. I remember sayin' to one of 'em, 'Ain't you a slob to address a lady so!' for he had out his card and was askin' sarcastic if he could call — the underdone fool. He was sportin' a grey tie. I noticed it special! Lemme see — there was Kitty Crossways, and Belle Simmons and Alice Lafarge — pretty name, ain't it! Alice tries to live up to it, bein' kind of soulful. Wait now, lemme see — just wait a minute. There was a real gent talkin' to Alice in that Pullman — talkin' quiet and nice, and no gaff. We teased her afterwards about him and she got mad. That's a sign a girl cares, *I say!*"

"Isn't Alice Lafarge one of the names you have?" I asked Margaret.

"I think it is — somewhere on North Fourth Street."

"That's her!" nodded Miss Magee. "She left the company — broke her contract; said she was goin' to be married. I've seen her once — but hubby wasn't home!" she added satirically.

We thanked her for the information. When

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

we were in the street again Margaret turned east.

"Do the Fourth Street cars run north or south?" she asked me.

"I've forgotten! Do you really think it's worth while to go further?"

"I'd like to know whether Miss Lafarge married the man in the Pullman — or some one else."

We were soon on the steps of another shabby, old-fashioned house. The woman who answered our ring was denying vigorously that Alice Lafarge was one of her lodgers, when a voice from the back hall called out, "That's me, Mrs. Henley."

A figure emerged — and at once I saw what Miss Magee meant when she had characterised her late fellow member as "kind of soulful." Alice Lafarge looked like a Burne-Jones maiden who by some accident of fate became a chorus girl. She was slim and wide-eyed, and though her face was powdered it was of that pure oval that one associates with angels and nuns. She was dressed plainly, and Margaret, I be-

## THIS WAY OUT

lieve, saw at once that the powder was to remove the effects of tears.

We asked if we might talk with her alone. She ushered us into a shabby bedroom on the ground floor, that evidently served also as a kitchen. Margaret was not as frank with her as she had been with Miss Magee; she spoke of the "Bunch of Roses" Company, and of their misfortunes, and gradually revealed the fact that she was tracing a man who was supposed to have travelled on the same train with the Company on a certain July night last summer. The girl's eyes immediately brightened. She made an effort to appear indifferent, but I saw that she trembled a little.

"Do you remember what passengers were in the Pullman?" Margaret asked.

Miss Lafarge laughed hysterically.

"Do I remember! You bet!" The tears rushed to her eyes. "Why, I met my future husband that night," she announced in a burst of candour.

"Indeed! Would you mind — describing him!"

"He was a real gentleman!" Miss Lafarge

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

said warmly. "Very mild and melancholy! That's what took me! I hate the other kind — that grin at every pretty girl they see. I always did like quiet men that act respectful, and don't treat you free because you're in the chorus."

"Do you remember any of the others? Do you remember if any man there wore a blue neck-tie with orange spots?"

Miss Lafarge stared and gasped. "Oh, my soul! *He* did."

"You mean the — gentleman — you afterwards married?"

"Yes, he was a Mr. Prendegast. I noticed his tie that night."

"How long afterwards was it that you married him?"

Over the girl's face spread a soft light like the reflection of a moon near its setting; as if her hard, shabby, breathless life had flowered for a little time into rest and beauty; into some semblance of her vague dreams.

"About three weeks. It was awful quick. He called every day while the Company was in Philadelphia — and we were married sudden one afternoon by the minister of a Methodist



## THIS WAY OUT

Church on Sixth street. Here's the certificate."

She produced it proudly, at the same time holding up her left hand and displaying a plain gold band. The certificate recorded the marriage of Alice Lafarge to James Prendegast in August.

"And you've lived in Philadelphia ever since?"

Mrs. Prendegast's eyes narrowed. I saw we were fast arriving at the point beyond which would be no thoroughfare. She replied in a curious, closed voice, "Ever since!"

It was as if we had forced her against a wall. The very essence of wifehood was in her mute determination that we should not know how that period of brief idealism had ended. I saw how passionately she had believed in her happiness, her good fortune, her coming to anchor, so to speak, in a domestic world, out of hearing of "choruses." There was a note of tenderness in Margaret's voice as she said:

"We are much obliged to you. You have cleared up some points for us."

A tension in the girl's manner prepared us for what she said next.

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

"What about that necktie? Why did you pick out a necktie?"

"For identification," I answered.

"It's a common enough pattern," Mrs. Prendegast observed, "nothing unusual in the combination of colours."

She challenged us to make any link of a necktie. I saw that the absent Mr. Prendegast still represented to his wife a world beyond her comprehension but not beyond her love; and that she was straining her eyes to trace him among shadows. The very room she was in betrayed expectation; its air of order had something of a shrine's precise appointments.

We made our adieus. The keeper of the lodging house was waiting for us on the steps. "Friends of hers?" she said with a jerk of her head towards the dark hallway.

"We have only just met," Margaret said.

The woman looked disappointed. "She owes me a month's rent. She's always puttin' me off and sayin' her husband will be back soon. Between you and me he's deserted her — that is if he *is* her husband. I kep' her because she's not like some of these hussies; givin' you sass if you

## THIS WAY OUT

ask 'em for a penny. That room rents for five a week steady. I can't let her have it much longer."

Margaret took out her purse and handed the woman bills, at the sight of which her eyes glistened. "You're real kind," she faltered.

"No, I'm not kind," Margaret replied with a touch of sharpness, "but Mrs. Prendegast must not be turned into the streets. Please consider me responsible for the rent for a month or two at least."

The woman became a quivering bulk of obsequiousness.

"Well! what do you make of it?" Margaret inquired when we were well away from the house.

"I don't see Strunk and his associates in the character of melancholy gentlemen who marry chorus girls. But her description does suggest Desmond. He's just mournful enough and quiet enough to pass for a 'gentleman' with a girl of that class. I've had the feeling that Desmond himself might have presented the check. As he had done so much, it is entirely reasonable to believe he could do more."

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

Margaret made no comment on that theory, beyond saying, "It seems strange that Mr. Stonington didn't recognise him."

"He may have had a disguise. I wish we could have a look through his wardrobe."

Margaret laughed. "To examine his ties? I suggest something better than that. We'll have a meeting of the Directors, and ask Desmond to be there. Then I'll produce Mrs. Prendegast. If he's the man she married she'll go straight to him."

"Will you tell them about our Miss Lafarge before the meeting?"

An expression of amusement crept into Margaret's face. "Certainly not! News leaks out too easily."

That now famous meeting was held one dark December afternoon. Desmond was there, looking more solemn even than the directors. I was now very sure that he was the missing husband of the fair Alice. His air of studied melancholy, of pinchbeck Byronic depression was just of the kind to mislead an impressionable girl hungry for "refinement."

## THIS WAY OUT

Margaret questioned him while the President, the directors and the teller watched her curiously, and, I perceived, with complete incredulity. I think they rather resented her interference. Yet she was exquisitely feminine as she sat by that long table, more a voice out of a dawn-tinted cloud than a Portia in judgment.

In the midst of her questions the bank's porter brought in a note to her "from a young lady outside."

"Show her in," said Margaret.

A mahogany partition cut Alice Lafarge off from view until she appeared in the doorway. She was dressed in black, and her eyes under the broad brim of her hat looked large and frightened; she swept the table with her gaze, then uttered a sharp cry.

"Oh, James! James!"

She had run straight to the teller, amidst an intense silence. He had risen, his face as pallid as a dead man's. His confraternity sat like figures carved in stone.

"Did you wear the blue necktie with orange spots, Mr. Stonington?" Margaret said in quiet accents.

## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

Then voices angry and excited, "You don't accuse Stonington!"

Margaret replied quietly, "I suspect him of collusion with Desmond."

Every one turned. There was no Desmond! He had slipped out, had vanished forever.

Then every one looked at Stonington who had become all at once the mere shell of a man, emptied of dignity, of self-confidence, of everything but a revival of his sense of obligation to the bewildered woman at his side. I was glad to see that he did not draw his hand away from hers, and that he looked at her with concern.

"We are waiting for your explanation, Stonington," the bank's President addressed him.

He gave it in a low voice and with downcast eyes. He had lost a large sum at cards and needed ready money. Desmond had been at the bank on various errands, and, perhaps by that diabolic sympathy which exists between people whose inner thoughts are dallying with evil, this tool of any bidder had gained the interest of the teller. Desmond promised him a third of the spoil, and Stonington, on the day before the check was to be presented, travelled to Baltimore

## THIS WAY OUT

for a conference with the forgers. He had agreed to shield them, but had under-rated his powers of dissimulation; and had veered back to the position of respectability in the hope that the active conspirators would get off in any case.

Histrionic criminality was not his strong point, or he would not, in describing his suspected man, have mentioned one of his own neckties — a necktie closely associated with an unethical journey which had brought forth a romance en route.

While he spoke the young wife's delicate face reflected her changing emotions, among which I saw no trace of personal repugnance. Whatever happened he would have some one to follow him through the world and revere at least her lost ideal of him.

The Directors declined to prosecute Stonington, but they insisted that he leave the State. He went West and took his wife with him. I imagined her consoled by his "gentleness," and willingly oblivious to his shame. He had lost honour; he had somehow won a woman's love.

"Did you suspect him from the first?" Clayton asked Margaret, as we all went together to the Pennsylvania station.

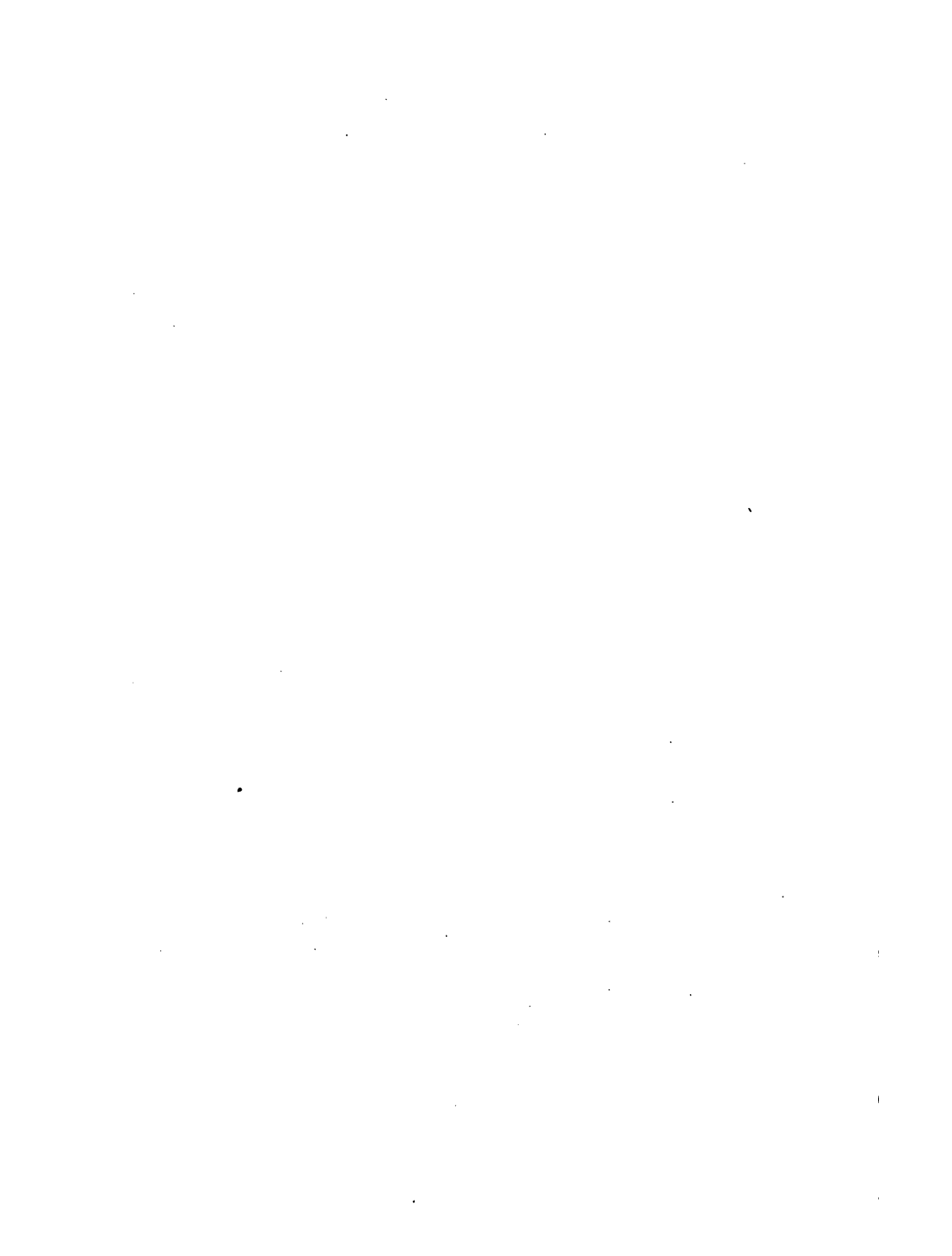
## THE GOLD IN THE WHEAT

"I had my suspicions aroused by a teller who could remember a necktie and not a face; but my clearest clue, was the wearing of that tie by Miss Lafarge's 'real gentleman.' I took her at her word," she added with a smile.

"But Margaret," I protested. "A chorus girl!"

"She is generally the most acute judge of the species! She has met so many of the other kind."





**CHAPTER X**  
**WITHOUT SCREENS**



## CHAPTER X

### WITHOUT SCREENS

“**H**AVE you any objection to making a visit of condolence with me?” Margaret asked me one day, when, a year or two after our marriage, we were sojourning in the unfashionable Catskill Mountains.

I replied, “That depends upon the people who are to receive your sympathy. Are they formidable?”

“It’s a lone lad of twenty-three who wants to see me,” Margaret said, “the son of my father’s old friend, Judd Henley, who died last month. The Henley homestead is on the Hudson. We can easily motor over and get back the same day.”

The ever-recurrent wonder filled me over the extent and variety of Margaret’s friendships. She knew people in every stratum of society and linked them together in her affections and interests with a sweet catholicity which minimised

## THIS WAY OUT

barriers. I thought her friends depended upon her too much, but a nature such as hers is a veritable magnet.

She told me something of Judd Henley as we sped next day towards the Hudson through the passes of the mountains. Her gift of characterisation brought vividly before me this old-fashioned New Yorker, with his lank frame, swarthy skin, and strong, homely features, of that ascetic type which reached its climax in Lincoln. She and her father had once spent the day at the Henley homestead, and she had retained a vivid recollection of the sweet-smelling, stiffly furnished house; of the dark, shut-up parlour, where the big dogs stole in for the coolness. One fell over them, she said, when summoned by a raucous gong and the smell of hot fried doughnuts to a stupendous dinner. She remembered particularly the dish of steaming succotash, and the ice-cold sliced cucumbers heavily covered with sour cream and red pepper.

"My father and the great Judd talked all the time; and little Joseph and I went through our dinners in silent satisfaction. There were pitchers of cream and of buttermilk and jugs of rasp-

## WITHOUT SCREENS

berry shrub; and how many chickens they had killed and served with the lightest dumplings was beyond my calculation. After dinner the men went off to Judd's adjoining lumber yard, with Joseph trotting at their heels, and I fell asleep in a hammock among the mingled smells of late roses and hot cedar planks."

She drew me so into the spirit of the place that when we arrived it was like returning to a familiar spot. The house was a typical along-the-Hudson farm-house, of black and red Dutch brick, with front door steps of huge slabs of granite. Two straight rows of ancient box led to this portal, and formed the borders of unkempt, old-fashioned flower-beds. Beyond the garden tall wine-glass elms cast an arabesque of ever moving shadow.

We were ushered into the parlour, into a green twilight produced by tall lilac bushes that pressed against the windows. On the walls were yellowed portraits of capped and bewigged Henley ancestors. The air held the scent of dried fruit and old wood — that peculiar odour found only in ancient houses.

Joseph Henley came in soon to greet us — a

## THIS WAY OUT

young boyish figure. His clear sad eyes brightened at sight of Margaret, who covered his first embarrassment with her reminiscences of their earliest meeting. Then in a voice growing still softer she spoke of recent matters and of the boy's loneliness, his inevitable loneliness! He acceded with such a sigh as only youth can give over its first great shock. After a while she led him away from this sadness by personal questions. Would he remain in the house? Was he going on with the business?

He spoke vaguely of his plans, as if they depended upon some secret hope or ambition; and after a while he asked us if we would like to see the lumber-yard. We followed him across the kitchen garden and into the spacious enclosure where the lumber was piled. Its slanting walls formed cool brown streets whose perspectives ended in glimpses of green, or of the glittering waters of the Hudson to which the yard extended and made union through a long wharf. On its extreme end sat a young girl reading. I noticed that Henley's eyes turned often in her direction, and he asked us at last if we would like to see the view of the river from the wharf.

## WITHOUT SCREENS

The girl, as we approached, closed her book and rose, blushing. I divined that she and our young host shared some treasure of romance which made their days and dreams precious. When they looked at each other, love-light was in their eyes, but he spoke to her with a reserve that implied a fear of his betraying excessive affection. He introduced her to us as "Miss Jessica Fane, one of my neighbours."

After we had admired the view and chatted a few moments with Miss Fane, we left her to her reading. Joseph cast a last glance back at her — a kind of Orpheus look as if he would draw them both out of some perplexity or misunderstanding.

He led us next to the "office," a stuffy, glaring little place whose walls were covered with lithographs of farmers' implements and the calendars of insurance companies. A high old-fashioned desk on whose surface were recorded many storms of ink, was heaped with papers in direst confusion.

"Father made me his sole executor," Joseph said with a despairing look at these documents, "and I'm having an awful time of it!"



## THIS WAY OUT

"Are there many uncollected bills?" Margaret asked.

"A considerable number—but they don't bother me particularly," he paused, drawing his brows together in a boyish frown. "They don't bother me," he repeated.

"What *does* bother you, Joseph?" Margaret asked directly with that appealing smile of hers.

He glanced at me.

"My husband is a lawyer," Margaret said. "He would be only too glad to give you any friendly unofficial advice of which you may be in need."

He hesitated a moment, then over his face spread that light of relief that illumines people's features when they are going to tell something at last and get it over with. He glanced about the office. "Suppose we step out-of-doors," he said; "the flies are dreadful here."

"Why don't you have the windows screened?" Margaret asked.

"I intend to when I have time. Father never wanted such comforts. He didn't mind flies. He never seemed to know they were around."

He led us to an arbour in the garden, and I

## WITHOUT SCREENS

saw him glance towards the wharf, but it was now deserted.

"Are there any real difficulties?" Margaret asked him, and his dreamy eyes turned again towards the spot where the girl had been reading.

He hesitated, then with a sigh he began. "Just one, but it's big enough to — to make a lot of difference. Three months ago Jessica's father borrowed nine thousand dollars of my father, and gave him a note for the amount payable two years from now. I heard father speak of it several times. He said it was a big amount, and he wondered if Mr. Fane would be able to meet the note when it fell due. Interest at four per cent. was to be paid half-yearly.

"I went to work on the papers immediately after the funeral, and when I found this note, what was my surprise to see, that instead of nine thousand dollars the note was for only ninety dollars. The sum was in figures, not written out — Father was very careless that way — and it was for ninety dollars, not nine thousand.

"I didn't know what to do," he continued. "You see, there is a — a rather close friendship

## THIS WAY OUT

between Miss Fane — and myself; and I hated like sixty to go to her father about it.”

His rueful voice, his heightened colour told even worse than his words.

“But you did go!” Margaret said.

“Yes, I did! I screwed up my courage one day and asked him how much he owed my father’s estate. He stared at me for a moment, then he said in rather a harsh voice, ‘You should know, my note must be among his papers.’

“‘It is among his papers,’ I replied, ‘but it is only for ninety dollars, and I understood that he had loaned you nine thousand.’

“He looked at me in a very queer way, then he said, ‘I owe the estate exactly what the note calls for — no less, no more.’

“I didn’t know how to answer him. In spite of — of my admiration of Jessica, I never felt at ease with her father. Even as a little chap I used to go out of my way rather than meet him. You see, I am not clever when it comes to talking. I put myself in a hole because I had told him the amount of the note instead of demanding that he tell me. Of course, in one way he is right; he owes the estate exactly what the note calls for,

## WITHOUT SCREENS

no more, no less; but why does it call for ninety dollars instead of nine thousand!"

"You are sure you didn't misunderstand your father," Margaret said.

"Quite sure."

"But haven't you the returned check for the amount?"

A little patient smile fitted for a moment over his face. "Father was an original person in his business methods. His carelessness was the talk of the town. People laughed at him, but no one ever took advantage of him, and things always turned out right until now. You ask about the check. Father paid everything in cash. It was one of his peculiarities."

"But didn't he keep his money in the bank?" I asked.

"Yes, but when he wanted to pay a bill he just drew a lot of money and paid it out of that. I asked him once why he did this, and he told me that years before he had tramped the streets of New York nearly starving because no one would cash a check he had. He couldn't get himself identified. That was the beginning of this strange practice of his."

## THIS WAY OUT

"But surely he kept books," I urged, "and at the bank you could easily discover whether three months ago he drew a large sum of money."

"I did inquire at the bank, and I found that he had drawn eleven thousand dollars about four days before this note was dated. But that proves nothing!"

"Let us go back to the office and examine the note," Margaret suggested.

We stood before the high, old-fashioned desk while Joseph spread open upon it the note written in a sprawling hand and signed "Augustus Fane" in small, cramped characters. Sure enough the sum indicated \$90.00.

"It's in black and white," I commented.

"Yet nine thousand dollars was the sum father told me. He said Mr. Fane was in difficulties, and I felt glad that he had loaned him the money, but now you see with this complication —"

He broke off and grew boyishly pink, while his wistful eyes turned for a moment towards the river and the spot where the girl had been.

"Your friendship with Miss Fane makes this all the more perplexing," Margaret commented.

## WITHOUT SCREENS

"That's just it! And it's impossible to pursue inquiries. He has never acknowledged that he owes me nine thousand dollars. He simply says that he owes me what the note calls for."

We examined it again. The period that had turned \$9,000 into \$90.00 was black and distinct.

"But such a way to write a note, Joseph!" Margaret exclaimed. "Didn't your father ever follow the usual forms?"

"Father used to say you didn't need anything in writing with honest people; and if they were dishonest, the devil himself couldn't draw up a document to hold them. In a way he has been justified, for since his death people have come in the office to pay debts of which I can find no record. This is the first trouble that has come up."

I wondered what Margaret would do next towards solving the problem. Much of the pleasure of watching her methods lay in the fact that one never knew whether she would disappear from mental vision into her own hidden processes of thought; or whether she would take a road clear to all beholders. Her eyes were fixed musingly on Joseph. At last she said with sweet

## THIS WAY OUT

directness, "Are you and Jessica engaged?"

He did not blush this time, but his face grew grave and mature, as if he looked across many years.

"Her father is opposed to her marrying me," he answered simply. "He has forbidden Jessica to go out with me. She sometimes comes to the wharf and I see her there. Of course, I mean to marry her just the same when all these matters are wound up."

"And you must wind them up!" Margaret exclaimed with an accent of confidence in her voice that set me wondering whether some light upon the subject was beginning to dawn in her mind. "This note should be set right. Your interest will soon be due, and there is a vast difference between interest on ninety dollars and on nine thousand."

"But what shall I do!" he exclaimed.

"An honest man stands by the deed, not the record of the deed. His evasion is against him."

"It's like him! It's like Augustus Fane!" Joseph said with a touch of bitterness. "He never said a straight yes or no in his life."

"Which I call the grey damnation," Margaret

## WITHOUT SCREENS

commented. "But perhaps we do him an injustice."

At that moment a figure appeared in the office door — Jessica Fane herself, pale and agitated. "Father's ill!" she exclaimed. "He has asked to see you — Joseph. I ran all the way!"

Joseph snatched up his hat, then hesitated, looking at us inquiringly, as if he wanted our support in an interview which he plainly dreaded. "May my friends come with me, Jessica?" he said.

"Of course! only don't lose time!"

Margaret picked up the note and put it in her bag; and following the young people, we proceeded through the lumber yard, then across a vacant field, and into the grounds of a large square house. The boy and girl paused on the steps to wait for us.

Through the doorway came the odour of strong restoratives and the sound of a gruff voice delivering orders. After ascertaining that her father was willing to see us, Jessica conducted us to the sitting-room, where propped up on a kind of couch bed with his working clothes on, was a man who might have stepped off a vaudeville stage, or out



## THIS WAY OUT

of a comic supplement as the typical Reuben of tradition. His eyes at once shrewd and melancholy looked from a lank, distrustful face; his thin drooping lips seemed closed on secrets not worth the keeping.

His daughter introduced us, then bent over him anxiously. "Are you better, Father?"

"Not well enough to take chances," he replied, "so I want to get certain things off my mind. I have something to say to you, young man," he he added, addressing Joseph.

But he seemed reluctant to begin. His cold grey eyes wandered from Joseph to Margaret and me. "I met your Father once, Mrs. Carpenter," he said. "A city man, but a durned honest one!"

Margaret replied, "He was a man of his word."

He darted a keen glance at her, then sighed and turned towards his daughter, who had taken his hand and was holding it tenderly between hers. In juxtaposition to his masculine ruggedness she appeared more than ever flower-like. Yet beneath her delicate contours was a suggestion of strength of character lacking in the man whose hand she held.

## WITHOUT SCREENS

"I remember you, too," Fane went on. "You came with your Father one summer. You slept in the hammock while we men talked business. It was a hot July day, and the flies were awful in Judd's office, but Judd never would have screens."

He paused and seemed for a moment to be dwelling wholly in the past. "Hot days and dark rooms — the smell of preservin' and the smell of honeysuckle — that's summer! I never liked the season much, for I had this same old heart trouble, and the heat and the hayin' together —"

He gasped for his breath, regained it and raised himself on his pillows. "I sent for you, Joseph Henley, to tell you just what I meant about that note. I want you to hear the story, and then ask yourself what's fair and square in the matter, fair and square. It goes back a long time, this tale — before you was born, before your father was married."

"Do you want us to go, Mr. Fane?" Margaret said.

He looked steadily at her a moment, then he replied, "You needn't go, but beware of

## THIS WAY OUT

that rocker. It tips back and spills ye sometimes."

Margaret assured him she was safe. His eyes wandered to Joseph. "That note now — what was it made out for?"

"Ninety dollars," Joseph replied reluctantly.

A gleam of humour lit up the sick man's eyes. "Ninety dollars," he repeated with unction, "ninety dollars. Have you got it with you?"

Margaret opened her bag. "Here it is! We were talking about it. I brought it along."

She handed the note to Augustus Fane, who tremblingly adjusted his glasses and examined it. "Right you are!" he commented, "ninety dollars plain as print."

He leaned back on his pillows. Joseph returned the note to Margaret as if she, not himself, was its real custodian. Fane's eyes followed him, and when he was again sure of his attention, he began in a clear reminiscent voice.

"The time I was goin' to tell you about was long ago — years and years ago, when Judd and I was mere boys. The story starts on a summer afternoon, up at the district school in Marsh-town, where we went because there wasn't any

## WITHOUT SCREENS

school then in this village. Your mother, Joseph, went there, too — and she was as pretty as May time — the prettiest little girl I ever see. She favoured Judd and me more than the other boys — some days Judd carried her satchel and some days I trotted after her, like a grateful dog. I never was sure that she took to me, and that begun all the misery — for your Father he was dead sure she liked him, just as he was dead sure of everything. That afternoon I was goin' to tell you of, it was at recess, and she come to us both with a problem. Judd got one answer. I got another. Sez she, 'which is right?'

"'Mine's right,' Judd said. 'I never make a mistake — never!'

"It was a proud boast, and what made it stronger, was the truth back of it. My mind went back to try and think of a time when Judd had made a mistake, but, Lord! it was no use! I wisht I could say the same, but only that mornin' I had made two mistakes in the geography class, and I knew it was no use! Little Anita Moore looked at us both, and sez she, 'Are you sure, too, Gus?' 'No, I ain't,' I snapped. 'I ain't so blamed sure of everything as Judd.'

## THIS WAY OUT

“‘I like to be sure,’ she said. ‘I guess I’ll take Judd’s answer.’

“The bell rang just then, and in we went, and the ‘rithmetic class was called; and Anita got that very problem we’d been talkin’ about. She went to the board and did it out as Judd showed her — and it was right! When she come down from the platform she looked at him and smiled; and I felt as if somebody had put a big stun on my chest. When school was out I climbed the hill where the seven pines were, instead of goin’ home for chores, though I knew I’d be licked, and I lay down on my face and cried. It was one of them mournful days that come in summer — a grey sky and a wind that sounds like November when the windows rattle. I lay and listened to the wind and cried because I couldn’t say I’d never made a mistake. There was no one to flog the nonsense out o’ me, so it got worse as years went on — that feelin’ I couldn’t be right.

“Anita got prettier and prettier — and at last she was a young lady, and Judd wuz courtin’ her and so wuz I! But the terrible doubt wuz always there, that I couldn’t be right in thinkin’ I’d get her — or that she’d care for me. She

## WITHOUT SCREENS

seemed glad to see me, though, and one night when I wuz comin' out of her gate with my head real high and the 'I-win-feelin'' in my heart, who should come along but Judd. He gave me one look, then sez he, 'You ain't got a ghost of a show, Gus. Anita's for me.'

"I spunked up then, and sez I, 'Don't you be too dum shore of that.'

"He answered back, 'I ain't never made a mistake yet.'

"'Ef you do ever make one,' sez I, 'will you stand by it — for life or death? Will you abide by it true?'

"'Ef ever I make a mistake,' says Judd, 'I'll stick by it, be it what it may.'

"My heart felt lighter then. Ef I won her he wuz to step out forever!

"But I didn't win her! There came a black summer when the chill of death wuz on the land for me, Joseph — the summer your father and mother wuz married. I had been wrong again, and Judd had made no mistake.

"I married three years later — then Jessica wuz born and her mother died; and not long after your mother died. I saw you growin' up

## THIS WAY OUT

and I disliked you because you wuz Judd Henley's son — the man who never made a mistake. I didn't want you to have Jessica, not because I had anything against you, but you Henleys always had your own way and it made me contrary. When you come to me the other day about the note, I said to myself, 'that's a queer question, he knows well enough what I owe,' so I answered you that I owed what the note called for, no more, no less; and when you said it called for ninety dollars I knew that Judd Henley had made a mistake at last."

A grim smile overspread his face, as he looked at Joseph, then at his daughter. "What do you think, Jess?" he said.

She flushed, but she answered gravely and firmly, "Father, you borrowed nine thousand dollars, therefore, you owe that amount."

"But how about Judd's word, his promise? He agreed to abide by a mistake if ever he fell into one!"

"If that's true, I'll keep my Father's promise for him," Joseph said. "If the note through some mistake calls for ninety dollars instead of nine thousand, then I'll abide by the mistake."

## WITHOUT SCREENS

Margaret during this conversation had withdrawn to a window and was examining the note through her pocket magnifying glass. When Joseph announced his intention of carrying out his father's word to the letter, she turned towards us and said quietly, "But Mr. Henley made no mistake. This note is for nine thousand dollars."

Augustus Fane almost flung himself from his couch in his excitement. "How do you make that out?" he cried.

"Because the dot that turns the nine thousand dollars into ninety is a — fly-speck."

She handed the note to Fane with the magnifying glass. He examined it eagerly, then, his face growing long and desolate, he exclaimed, "By gum, but you're right!"

He leaned weakly back among his pillows. "I can't laugh, O Lord, I can't laugh, my heart's so weak! but it's funny! funny! Even after Judd's dead, he's right. His darned old flies did the trick — not he!"

His mouth relaxed from its grim lines. Applying his nail to the speck he scratched it off, then handed the paper to Joseph.



## THIS WAY OUT

"There! mebbe I can meet it when it's due, and mebbe I can't!"

Joseph flushed.

"You know what I want more than money! O, you know well enough what I want!"

Fane looked at his daughter, then his eyes softened and he sighed as if relinquishing at last the too heavy burden of his own will.

"Take her!" he exclaimed. "She'll have to be my security — if I don't live."

The girl rose and came towards Joseph, her arms half-extended, and the tears welling in her eyes. The two went out softly together.

Margaret approached the couch where the old farmer lay with closed eyes. "You don't mind my speaking out," she said gently, "the poor boy was in such a quandary."

He opened his eyes and gazed at her with a child-like submissive look. I had the feeling that his time was not long in a world where he had never been sure that he was right.

"I'm tired of tryin' not to make mistakes," he said. "I jes' thought I wouldn't try any more."

"You've made no mistake this time," Margaret said. "They'll be very happy."

## WITHOUT SCREENS

"I must tell Judd when I see him," he murmured. "I'll tell him what a close shave he had post-mortem to makin' a little mistake of eight thousand or more to his loss. I guess if he could get back he'd put in screens!"

THE END

PROPERTY  
OF THE  
NEW YORK  
PUBLIC LIBRARY

